University of Alberta

Sing For Me, Kalyna!

by

Lisa Grekul ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *Sing For Me, Kalyna!* by Lisa Grekul in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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April 27, 1998

For my father's sister,

and my aunt,

Jean.

Abstract

Sing For Me, Kalyna! is the story of Colleen Lutzak, a third generation Ukrainian-Canadian girl born with the 'gift of song' and raised in the (ostensibly) multicultural town of St. Paul, Alberta. The novel is a comic *bildungsroman* narrated in the first person by Colleen. Her narrative, in fact, is split into two strands: (1) the present narrative strand, in which Colleen attempts to make her mark in Toronto's music industry; and (2) the retrospective narrative strand, in which Colleen recounts first her early years in St. Paul and then her two-year adventure as a college student in southern Africa. In the present narrative strand, Colleen's musical ambitions and ideals are thwarted and, in order to support herself, she turns to making and selling *pysanky*, Ukrainian Easter eggs. Ultimately, it is the act of writing on eggs that forces Colleen to come to terms with her experiences in Africa, as well as her identity as a Ukrainian, a Canadian, a woman, and a singer.

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Part One

Barry and Salina

Same woman, same routine. I venture out once a day to buy milk and cigarettes: milk for the wild kitten that's living underneath this house and cigarettes for--who else--the country mouse who's dying inside.

I'm starting to seriously consider a new corner store. I can't take much more of this. I walk in, I look at the two-litre cartons--Mom's voice in my head, *Check the date*. Sometimes I pick up cheese too; a loaf of bread; a carton of eggs--Mom's voice in my head again, *Check to see that none of the eggs are broken.* And I head towards the cashier. Standing at the cash register, I ask for one pack of Du Maurier King Size Lights, please. Then she starts her underbreath muttering. In Portuguese.

The first few times this happens, of course, I think that the cashier is disappointed in my smoking; for a while I think it's the nose ring. It's as though I were her daughter and she disapproves. In fact, she reminds me of my own mother--they are roughly the same age, have the same dark hair, dark eyes. Mom is much slimmer, of course, but she would look the same way at my smoking and at my nose-ring--if she knew.

I conduct informal experiments with the Portuguese woman in order to determine what exactly it is about me that so profoundly irks her. I buy cigarettes and no milk, she mutters; I buy milk and no cigarettes, she mutters. I buy Trident, she mutters. And every time she scowls and mumbles, my face radiates and glows. I try loose change instead of dollar bills--I try dollar bills instead of loose change. I try combinations of variables: loose change and milk; dollar bills and cigarettes. On occasion, I get angry. What the hell does she care what I buy? Money's money. I could buy condoms and dirty magazines with pocketfuls of pennies. I should. None of her business.

Today in the corner store, we go through the usual routine--this time over a copy of the *Toronto Star*. A newspaper. What is so wrong--so terrible--about buying a newspaper? I'm buying it for the Classifieds, for the Help Wanted ads. I have a right to the Classifieds. I have a right to look for a job.

So this time, when the cashier starts her muttering--in Portuguese--I mutter right back. In English. I don't suppose that she can understand me--as far as I can tell, she doesn't speak English--but I mutter nonetheless, glaring, my arms crossed. At the very least, she can figure out what I'm saying from my body language. It's about time I stood up to the old bat.

At first, I'm sarcastic. Quietly, half-whispering, I say, Well, service with a smile, that's what I love most about this convenience store, the *friendly* face at the cash register! Then, as I pick up my bag from the counter, I say it like it is. Actually, I say, raising my voice, for your information, I have yet to come across a friendly face in this store. You know, where I come from, believe it or not, people don't treat other people this way--people aren't *rude* for no reason.

While I speak, the cashier pulls her cardigan sweater tight across her chest. She frowns, picks at a piece of lint on her left sleeve. Turning away from the cashier and toward the doors of the store, I say that from now on, I'll be taking my business elsewhere.

But before I can storm out onto the street, the woman at the cash register starts yelling back at me. She's never yelled before, only muttered. The yelling is awful. And other people in the store are staring, now, raising their eyebrows--some are even shaking their heads, as though I've done something wrong. As though I've stolen something. I can't fight back--I have no idea what the woman is saying. For all I know, she could be swearing at me in Portuguese, calling me names. Threatening to call the police, even.

There are tears in my eyes as I walk out of the store, then run down the street. Horrible old woman, old witch. Old *bitch.* The sound of her voice--her voice yelling--echoes in my ears as I run. What did I ever do to her? I'm friendly, I'm polite. I always say please and thank you.

Two or three blocks away from the convenience store, I hear quick footsteps behind me. Someone is coming after me, following me--running, actually, at top speed. The police? Now I'm starting to panic. Maybe I stole something and I didn't realize it. Or maybe something just dropped from the shelf into my pocket. Maybe someone slipped something into my pocket--intentionally--while I was in the store. I keep running, checking my pockets as I go. My face, now, is flushed from the heat of the chase, beads of sweat are collecting along my forehead.

He catches me in front of a Laundromat five or six blocks from the corner store. Of course he's much taller than me--longer legs--so he runs faster. But he's not a policeman, he's just a guy--a Latino-type with dark, shoulder-length hair pulled back into a ponytail at the nape of his neck. Over a white T-shirt, he wears a short, black leather jacket; his jeans are tight in the legs and the hips and the crotch. For a split second, it occurs to me that I could knee him hard in his groin, then high-tail it home.

Except that he--Mario--is a perfect gentleman, introducing himself, shaking my hand. There is a slight accent in his voice--very sexy--and he smells of expensive cologne--ditto--and he stands close to me as we talk, looking me straight in the eye--ditto, ditto, *ditto*. Mario explains that the woman in the store is his mother, and he apologizes for the way she treated me. He says that, unfortunately, his mother is old-fashioned. She doesn't understand that nowadays a lot of us prefer to speak English.

Mario goes on, then, about Portuguese-Canadian girls and their *need* to speak good English. It's one thing, he says, if they're going to live out their lives in Portugal. But we're all Canadian now, *eh*--he laughs--so we'd better act like Canadians.

It takes me some time to figure out why Mario is saying all of this to me. In fact, he has finished praising me for the way I talk--no accent or anything--and has even gone on to ask me out on a date before I see what's going on, before the whole picture comes into focus. I'm Portuguese--to Mario's mother, to him. Of course. I'm living in the Portuguese part of the city. What else could I be?

And Mario's mother muttered, then yelled, because I spoke English to her. Every time I came into the store, I spoke English. It was all about Portuguese, the language. The mother tongue.

I interrupt Mario as he invites me out to dinner. I explain that there has been a misunderstanding.

I'd like to go out with you, I say. Don't get me wrong. Dinner sounds good--great. It sounds great. But you do realize--well. The thing is, I'm not Portuguese. Not at all. I mean, it probably doesn't make a difference to you what I am. You know, since we're all Canadians. *Eh*? The truth is, though, I'm--

Mario is glancing, now, I notice, at his watch and at the street, alternately. When I pause, he says that it's been nice talking to me but he's really got to get going. Business appointments, errands to run. He'll give me a call some time.

--Ukrainian.

I finish my sentence as Mario crosses the street and disappears into the horizon of Little Portugal. His ponytail swishes from side to side across his back as he walks, I wave my fingers up and down as I watch him go. Of course he isn't going to call. How can he? He doesn't have my number.

***

I think that I'm exempt from Mom's warnings--*Don't spend too much time on your first egg. It isn't going to be perfect. Practice, practice, practice.* Practice *makes perfect.*

My first try is going to be a masterpiece. By the time Sophie and Wes make seven *pysanky* each, I'm still writing on the white shell of my first egg. Mom bugs me constantly about my egg: she's the pro but she's also bossy and I can't concentrate with her nagging.

Before I started my *pysanka*, Mom told me ten times to use a fresh egg from Auntie Rose's farm but Auntie Rose's eggs are polka dotted with chicken crap and I can't hack the smell or the thought of writing on poop. Mom's solution is to gently dip the egg gently in vinegar gently and then wipe it gently--she says gently a hundred times as though I'm retarded. I know the eggs are raw, I *know* to be gentle. I've seen Dad break an egg right in his hands when he tried to wrap a fat rubber band around it. The rubber band was supposed to be a sort of stencil, so that Dad could make nice, straight lines around the egg. But the rubber band was too tight and it cracked the egg shell. I saw it with my own eyes. I *know* to be careful.

Dad likes to try new ways of making *pysanky*--like the rubber band. The Big Boss, though--Mom--is backward when it comes to *pysanky*. She says that beeswax is permanent: if you make a mistake, you can't erase it, and no pencil allowed. Dad uses pencil all the time on his eggs. Mom uses the old time *kistka* and candle, which makes wax blob all the time; Dad uses the electric *kistka* and gets much neater lines. Even after Mom dyes her egg in black, she uses a candle to heat the wax before she wipes it off. The candle takes for-ev-er. Dad puts his black egg in the oven and after three minutes--not four because after four minutes the egg cracks all over--all of the wax is melted. With one swipe of the Kleenex, the egg is done. I'm going to make my *pysanka* the modern way.

I don't wash my white egg with vinegar, I wash it with Pinesol. Dye sticks to a clean egg, and Pinesol cleans better than vinegar. I would have used Mr. Clean except that we're out. So I wash my egg three times with the Pinesol and I scour it with an SOS pad just to be extra sure.

When I return from the laundry room after thoroughly cleaning my egg, the Big Boss nags me doubly hard about using poopy eggs and vinegar--almost as though she's sniffed out my plan. But it's not at all like Mom to stay quiet when she knows I've disobeyed; that she doesn't mention the Pinesol or the SOS pad means I'm home free. My plan is to *not* tell her my new method and let her be surprised when the most brilliantly yellow egg--mine--comes out of the yellow dye. Then and only then will I tell her my discovery.

Once Mom sees how yellow my egg is, she'll probably make *kapusta* soup which, as my favorite food, is a mere bonus. The real reward is having a better *pysanka* than Sophie or Wes--having the best. And my secretest of all motives is Show-and-Tell. With my *pysanka*, I'm going to be such a celebrity in my grade three class that probably Mrs. Kostiniuk is going to ask me to show the other grade three class as well. In fact, I should probably prepare to do Show-and-Tell for all the kids in grades one to four.

I work so carefully on the white shell of my *pysanka* that by midnight Friday--way past our bedtime--I haven't even dyed my egg yellow yet. The next morning, Saturday, I wake up two hours before everyone else to work on it. I study the postcard from the Ukrainian Bookstore in Edmonton because on it is a photograph of my model--the most complex *pysanka* I could find. I am looking for all of its yellow features so that I know exactly what to do with my egg when it comes out of the yellow dye. And I'm modern, all the way. I only use the electric *kistka*.

Of course, I make the odd mistake here and there. At first, I worry because Mom says that the beeswax is permanent. But when I take my fingernail and scrape a little blob of wax off my white egg, it ALL comes off--without a trace. Then I know I'm safe. This beeswax isn't permanent after all. In fact, I can't believe that Mom didn't think of just scraping off the wax. But then this is probably modern wax and, in the olden days, wax was different.

My egg sits in the yellow dye from 7:33 to 7:43 on Saturday morning, exactly ten minutes. To be even safer, I leave it in while I count to ten: now it's got to be ready. I gently put the spoon gently into the dye and gently tuck it under the egg and lift it gently so that I can see the color. I've seen Mom do this over and over again for Wes, who's too small to dye eggs, plus I've seen Sophie do it with her own eggs. It's not as easy as it looks. There's a lot of clanking and clunking. Mostly the spoon against the glass jar but once the egg itself gets a good whack and my heart stops.

Still, I'm not concerned about my egg breaking at the moment--I'm concerned about prematurely waking the Big Boss. She's supposed to wake up and walk into the kitchen where I will be calmly bent over the radiantest yellow egg she's ever seen. I'm thinking of putting a *babushka* on, too. Nice touch. The plan will be entirely botched if I wake her up with my banging around in the kitchen and chasing the stupid egg around the jar with a spoon.

I guess everyone wakes up, not just Mom, and they all make their way to the kitchen. I don't hear them. I am crying very quietly, trying to salvage my egg and my plan. Wes tears into the kitchen, his hands full of Lego and tells me that my egg is still white, as though I didn't know. I slap him hard across the head and then my stomach turns because Mom and Dad have seen me do it. But they don't say anything. Dad lifts Wes and carries him back through the hallway. Mom doesn't say a word.

As Mom looks at the not even light yellow egg, as she turns it around slowly in her hand, I know what's coming. *Mothers are always right. One of these days, you'll learn to listen. Look at this! A perfectly good egg ruined.* But the Big Boss transforms before my teary eyes--transforms into an angel with big wings. She holds me on her lap while I bawl about my egg, my pure white egg. I tell her that I want to smash it into the garbage can, that I'm never going to make another *pysanka* again. Then I hear the fridge close behind me. Sophie has a fresh new egg, just a little pooped-up, wrapped in Kleenex.

And I start again. This time, I keep no secrets. My mother knows that this *pysanka* is destined for Show-and-Tell so it must be perfect. Together we choose a simpler design--a series of bands that wrap around the egg and fill the space between two large chickens. The trick is to make the bands look like they have no beginnings and no endings; then the birds are easy.

Sophie refuses to put birds on her *pysanky*. She is in grade five and she takes meanings very seriously. Birds on *pysanky* make your wishes comes true, sure, but they also make you have babies. She gives me a mean look when I decide on this design. We've made a pact not to ever have babies. Later that night, though, when my egg is well on its way and almost ready for the red dye, I tell Sophie, No, I haven't changed my mind about the babies. I'm after the *wishes*. Plus by the time I'm old enough to have babies, the baby-making effect of the chicken *pysanka* will have worn off. All the while that I'm making my chicken *pysanka*, I'm wishing that my Show-and-Tell will be a hit--and, if there's any wish left over, that I'll never have to go to phys. ed. again.

I make my *pysanka* the old-fashioned way, now--the electric *kistka* has made lines on Dad's *pysanky* that are too fine to see and Dad's last *pysanka* blew up in the oven. I am prepared with a speech for my class, too, about the way that my family keeps the olden days alive. Which is much more interesting than being modern anyway. I write my speech on a recipe card so that I don't flub it. Sophie helps me practice while we have our bath together on Sunday night, Mom listens to my speech while she braids my hair for the night, and Dad listens to it one more time as he tucks me in.

> *This weekend, my family made* pysanky. Pysanky *are Ukrainian Easter eggs. They are made with beeswax, a candle, a* kistka, *vinegar, and dyes. We have an electric* kistka *which is modern but the olden days* kistka *is the best kind. This is the* pysanka *I made this weekend.*

Sophie, Mom, and Dad agree that I should explain what a *kistka* is because the kids in my class are not going to understand. Of course, this is part of my master plan. I want to take questions while the kids look at my *pysanka* and the best way to guarantee questions is to create a big mystery around the *kistka*. Mom packs my *pysanka* into a Tupperware egg container, especially made for one egg.

On Monday morning, I sit through two other Show-and-Tells before my turn comes up. We only have Show-and-Tell on Mondays and it's a very big deal. Jessie Conrad brings her new Kissing Barbie that comes with a tube of Barbie lipstick. Not very original and she's probably going to get in trouble for it. We're not supposed to bring toys unless they're educational. Two weeks ago, Sean O'Connor brought his entire set of GI Joes and Mrs. Kostiniuk wasn't very impressed.

I've got butterflies in my stomach but there's no way to turn back now--I don't want to, either. My last Show-and-Tell was the volcanic ash from Mount St. Helens we collected in a pickle jar last summer on our trip to the States. It was nothing compared to Carla Senko's pet salamander. I've got to make a comeback. My hands are sweaty, my recipe card is getting soggy and a little bent out of shape. Joe Redcrow Jr. shows an eagle whistle his uncle carved out of elk antler. Quite good, but he doesn't have a speech, so mine is still going to be better. When the time comes, I deliver my speech without a single mistake, just like I practiced--clearly, slowly, and with feeling, especially when I come to the part, *This is the* pysanka *I made this weekend.*

I have practiced taking the egg out of the Tupperware and I know that I have to be very gentle because of my raw masterpiece inside. At home, though, my hands weren't sweaty, and actually Dad held the container while I opened the top. I ask Mrs. Kostiniuk to help, and though she holds the bottom just like Dad, something goes wrong on the top end. The lid is on so tight that my hands start to shake as I try to pry it off. Joe Jr. starts making grunting sounds, to give the impression that I'm trying to poop. The whole class cracks up at him and at the exact moment that Mrs. Kostiniuk lets go of the Tupperware to give them heck, the top comes off the container and my *pysanka* smashes on the desk.

I can't cry. I'm in grade three, practically grade four; I'm not a baby anymore. Still, the more Mrs. Kostiniuk looks at me like my mother died the more I want to bawl. My face is radiantest red; my ears, too. And there is salt burning in my eyes but I hold it back with a fake smile and a made-up part of my speech.

Oh this happens all the time, I say, because *pysanky* are raw, not boiled, eggs, and I have lots more at home so--I'll just--I'll just bring another one next Monday.

***

Colleen Lutzak. C. Lutzak. Colleen. In a bar two blocks from my apartment, on the back of a cardboard coaster, I practice my signature. I haven't decided yet what my stage name will be but I do know that my handwriting is too neat--too normal--for autograph purposes. Joni Mitchell, Joan Baez, Janis Joplin--all the great women folk singers had great signatures when they started out, I'm sure of it. Their signatures were original, off-the-wall. Anything but ordinary. Of course, they all had at least one J in their names. J has much more potential than C.

I try several approaches to spicing-up my handwriting--big, flowery loops, first, as if vines and shoots were growing out of the letters. Too girly, I think; too feminine. The image I want to portray is bolder, tougher--streetwise, really. Instead of loops, then, I try sharp, straight lines--bolder, maybe, but boring. I try writing as though I were left-handed, with the words slanting to the left; I try writing up-and-down, with no slant at all.

Clearly, the problem is my name itself--the letters in my name, that is. Nothing creative can be done with them. They are hopeless. So I start to change the spelling. *Kolleen Lutzak*, not bad. More room to play, with K. *Kolleen Zak*. Even better. I like the sound of it, plus there is an infinite number of ways to write a capital letter Z.

I am putting the finishing touches on Kolleen Zak when the waitress comes by to refill my coffee cup. She comes from behind me--out of the blue--leaving me no time to flip over the coaster, to keep her eyes from my handwriting. She sees the signatures, no doubt about it. She sees them, she reads them, and then she laughs at them--laughs at *me*, in fact.

Not openly. No. To my face, the waitress just smiles. I'm not fooled, though. I know that once she returns to the bar, she'll burst into uncontrollable giggles. The bartender will ask, What's so funny? And after she tells him about the girl sitting at the table in the corner practicing her signature, the bartender will join in her hysterics. What does she think she is? A star? They will point as they hold their sides, wipe their eyes with napkins--point at me.

But I won't give them the satisfaction. Before they have a chance to giggle and point, I'm out of the bar, coaster in my pocket. Wait, I think. Just you wait! In a few months, after I've cut my first album, when my face is plastered on record store windows and my name is at the top of the charts--then who will be laughing? Just you wait.

On my way back to my apartment, it does occur to me that I've gotten ahead of myself somewhat by practicing my signature. Record deals don't just drop from the sky. I need to play gigs first--pay my dues. Make a name for myself in the music industry, make contacts. Attract a following. Attract the interest of the big-name record companies. It will take time, I know. I'll have to find a day job making lattés at some coffee shop or answering phones in some office--steady work that will pay the rent until my music career starts to soar.

I don't expect that a day job will drop from the sky, either, so I am shocked when the opportunity falls into my lap, literally. It's fated, I think, some sort of destiny that several blocks from my place, tucked between a discount furniture store and a Christian book shop, there is a small, brick building with a cross on its front doors and the words *São Domingos Catholic Church.* God is singling me out, talking to me. Giving me my first break. Beneath the cross is a sheet of paper advertising for a new organist.

With a little work, I could learn to play the organ. Organs are just like pianos, and I've taken piano lessons all my life, played dozens of pieces of sacred music. At last, the lessons pay off. Literally. There is the small problem of foot pedals--organists play bass notes on foot pedals with their feet. But Sister Maria, my old piano teacher, got by for years without using the foot pedals of the pipe organ in the Cathedral in St. Paul. She called herself a thalidomide organist. No one ever knew the difference.

Then there is the salary issue. The salary would certainly be modest, I'm sure. I would be getting paid, though, to make *music*. God is giving me a steady gig, essentially. And I'm not a religious person, exactly, but how could I turn Him down?

As I stand before the church doors, taking down the necessary information on the coaster from the bar, a girl appears at my side. Actually, she's at least as old as me, so that makes her a grown-up woman. Her hair is long and braided down her back; she wears a jogging suit and Adidas running shoes. She doesn't look like a musician, she looks like an athlete. I ask if she's applying, too. For the organist job

The woman laughs. No. She's had the job for five years, and now she's moving on. Just came by to collect some of her music from the church. It was a good job to have, though, she says. Paid the rent while she was studying at the university. Five long years, she says, sighing. I know this place inside and out. It's been my second home.

Do you mind if I ask you something? I say, crossing my arms over my chest.

Not at all, says the woman. Go ahead. Shoot.

Do I have to be Catholic? I say. And Portuguese? To get the job, I mean. Because it *is* a Catholic church, and this *is* Little Portugal.

The woman shakes her head. Not at all, she says. The bishop, the fathers--trust me. Extremely open-minded diocese here, extremely friendly congregation. If you happen to be Catholic, well, great. And if you can speak Portuguese, bonus, you'll have fewer problems following the service. But look at me, for example. Do I look Portuguese to you? No. That's because I'm not. I'm German. Well, you know, mostly German, plus a little Scandinavian, Scottish, Irish. And I was baptized Lutheran, though we never really went to church when I was growing up, as my parents didn't care much for it. Has anyone at *São Domingos* ever judged me for it? No.

Really? I say, smiling.

Really, she says. And I've been here five years, I know what I'm talking about. So long as you practice, so long as you play what you're told to play when you're told to play it, you'll be fine. After a couple of weeks, you'll get the hang of the service, and after a couple of months, it will all be second nature to you.

Sounds simple enough, I say, shrugging my shoulders.

All they really care about, says the woman, is that you're a Christian, officially. All they really need to know is that you've been baptized *something*. Doesn't matter what. Lutheran, United, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Baptist, Adventist....

As she slips through the church doors, the woman wishes me luck with the job. For a minute or two, I hover on the sidewalk in front of the church before I tuck the coaster back into my pocket, before I make my way down the street. I throw my shoulders back. I lift my chin. I tell myself that it isn't as though a door has been slammed shut in my face. It isn't as though a door has been shut gently even. It isn't as though a door has been closed at all.

After all, for a door to be closed, officially, it must first have been opened.

***

When Carla Senko finds out on the first day of grade four that I have never been baptized, she crosses the first fingers of her hands and shoves them in my face and calls me the Devil's Child. We--Carla and I--are trying to establish why our third best friend, Giselle, is nowhere to be found. I say that Giselle's just not well today; I wasn't feeling too well this morning either. Maybe her mother gave her de-worming pills. That's what my mother did to me on the first day of school, grade three: one big, bright pink pill with my Frosted Flakes. Second period I was a little nauseous; first recess I didn't go out to play; lunch time, in the playground, I puked all over my brand new white sandals and a little bit on my flower girl's dress from my cousin's wedding. Giselle will be here tomorrow. She's just sick.

Except that Carla's heard otherwise. Carla's heard that Giselle isn't going to our school anymore. Our school is Protestant. Giselle's dad is Nothing but her mom is Catholic. According to Carla, whose auntie works with Giselle's mom's best friend, Giselle's mom and dad split up over the summer--so now, according to Carla's auntie, Giselle will be switched to the French Catholic school in town. We call it the École.

None of this makes sense to me. I don't trust Carla who is, in fact, only my *second* best friend. Giselle is my *first* best friend and I can't believe that she won't be coming to this school anymore. Her house is three blocks away. Together, we always walk to school in the morning, back home for lunch, to school after lunch, and back home after school. She's got the flu. I should probably check up on her on my way home for lunch. I'll pick her some flowers.

I can't imagine why Giselle's mother would send her there, to the École. I explain to Carla that the École is filled with a bunch of bloody Jesuses, each with a big hole in his stomach, and little holes in his wrists and ankles, and littler holes yet on his head, from the thorns. *Holy*. He's nailed to the École gymnasium wall; in the École classrooms; around the École teachers' necks. It's creepy. Plus the kids don't learn much since they're always at the cathedral, praying and saying the Lord's Prayer and all that. They have no time for real lessons.

But Carla can't imagine why Giselle's mother *wouldn't* send her there, to the École--Carla can't imagine why Giselle's mother didn't send Giselle there sooner. It's logical, says Carla. If a Ukrainian Catholic school were to open in St. Paul, her parents naturally would send her there.

I'm like a thermometer. I didn't know that my two best friends went to church every Sunday, and as it becomes clearer and clearer to me that we must not have been such best friends after all, my body warms. From the toes up, the blood inches up my legs, churns up my stomach, wiggles across my chest. By the time it reaches my face, I'm ready to cry.

Now Carla is telling me the differences between French Catholics in St. Paul and Ukrainian Catholics in Spedden, about confession and communion and catechism. Then she asks me what church *I* go to. My mom and dad have never taken me to church. Except for Rick's wedding when I was the flower girl. I could make it up and say United; that's where Rick's wedding was. But then Carla might see through me. I don't know if the United church has confession, communion, and catechism. I tell Carla the truth. I tell her that I have never been baptized, I--we, my family--don't go to any church.

That's when Carla takes three steps back from me, makes the cross, calls me the Devil's Child. Only for a minute, though. After a minute or so, she comes close to me again and tells me very quietly and very seriously that if I am not baptized, I will go to hell. I must get baptized. And if I can't get baptized, at least I should wear a cross--all the time--this way, at least when I die, God might give me a chance. In the meantime, she will talk to her mother about getting me baptized.

I try to argue but I don't know enough about God and the Devil to stand up to Carla. I *do* know that I'm not sure I want to be baptized. I'm not sure I want Mrs. Senko to know I'm the Devil's Child. I'd much rather ask my own mother; I trust my mother. She must have left me--and Sophie and Wes--unbaptized for a reason. I tell Carla I'm not, I most certainly am *not*, the Devil's Child. And if I am, I don't mean to be.

By the second day of grade four, I'm pretty sure that I am not the Devil's Child. Dad has given me a lengthy talking-to about priests, churches, the Bible, Jesus, Catholic school. He says that Sophie, me, and Wes are luckier than most kids. We get to be whatever we want when we're old enough to choose, unlike other kids, like Carla Senko, who are forced to be whatever their parents are. We go to Protestant school because Protestant school doesn't give a damn about Bible lessons, and that's good.

Dad says that he and Mom are Orthodox Ukrainians. No, Orthodox Greeks. Greek Ukrainian Orthodoxes. Ukrainian Orthodox Greeks. Anyway, they don't practice and, even if they did, their hocus-pocus is very different from--in fact, better than--French or even Ukrainian Catholics. But then, according to Dad, I can figure that out for myself when I'm older.

When I'm with Dad, I feel quite confidently unlike the Devil's Child. I'm mostly honest, I respect my elders, I feed my cat. Dad says that I can not go to church and still be a good person.

When I'm with Carla, I forget all of Dad's words. The second week of grade four, she lends me her gold cross--to wear until I get baptized. She makes it her mission to boss me around about church, telling me stories of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, David and Goliath, Adam and Eve. Carla doesn't want to be best friends with the Devil's Child, so I must learn if I want to be around her. And, with Giselle gone, Carla's all I've got--Carla with the feathered hair, Carla with the Jordache jeans, Carla with the pierced ears, Carla with God.

But as grade four progresses, Laurie-Anne starts taking my place as Carla's best friend, then Sara H., then Michelle. I know that I have to fight to get Carla back. I pester Mom and Dad, weekly--daily, even--to take me to church. Just once, to see if I like it. Secretly, I know that I'm going to love it. I'm going to love church so much that after two or three tries, I'm going to get baptized and Carla will be my best friend again--mine all mine, all all all *mine*.

It's nearly the end of May before Mom and Dad finally agree to take me to their church, the church they never go to, the church I am going to make my new home. We are going to a special Easter Friday service so I'll have lots to tell Carla on Monday morning. Sophie and Wes are going to come, too--we'll be a happy family off to church just like the Senkos.

On the car-ride to church, I cross my fingers that the priest will talk about Gabriel. Gabriel is the angel who comes to earth to announce Jesus's birth. Of all the stories Carla tells, the stories of Gabriel are the best. I picture him jolly and chubby, just like Santa, and he loves children, and he is also very wise. I hope we get a spot near the organ, which Carla says is the best seat. As we walk into church, I am smiling and swinging my left arm as I hold Dad's hand with my right. I'm wearing my yellow jumper with the white blouse. I am a ray of sunshine.

When Dad lets go of my hand, I grab his up again but he shakes me away. I didn't know, Carla didn't tell me. Boys and girls sit separately. No matter, I take my mother's hand in mine. Then stupid Wes starts to cry for no reason and Mom has to use both her hands to pick up him and hold him. So I grab for Sophie's hand. I'm starting to panic. It smells funny in here, I'm cold. It's gloomy, too, except for the hundred thousand million tiny candles dripping wax everywhere--maybe on me if I'm not careful.

Sophie's angry, I can tell. She's angry because she doesn't want to be here, in church, and she tells me so by glaring, by shaking my hand away. When I ask her where the organ is, she hisses, Why ask me?

Because, Sophie. Because you went once before. You went to Dad's Baba*'s funeral.* I think this but I don't say it. Instead, I look around for an organ, by myself. I don't need Sophie. I find dad on the men's side, by myself. I look at the hymn book and the Bible stuck in the little bookshelf attached to the back of the pew in front me--*by* *myself.* The books are both in Ukrainian, so I can't read them, but the Bible is made from thin, shiny paper. I flip through the Bible and rub my finger on the pages, then I lift the book to smell it.

Auntie Mary gives me a dirty look. She's sitting beside Wes who is beside Mom who is beside me--it's Sophie, me, Mom, Wes, Auntie Mary, Auntie Pearl. In the pew behind us are my grown-up cousins, Orysia and Dalia, plus Rick's new wife, Darlene. Auntie Linda, Auntie Jean, Auntie Marika, Auntie Helen, Auntie Rose, Auntie Natalka. I know that my aunties don't go to church every Sunday, so when I look around me I know that everyone must be as bewildered as I am. They must at least feel a little strange.

I want to ask Mom questions about the crosses here, each with its little horizontal bar, its longer horizontal bar, its slanty bar. Carla's cross looks much different. And the cushioned piece of wood in front of us that you can flip up or down on hinges--does Carla's Catholic church have this? Do the École classrooms have padded pieces of wood like these? I don't imagine that Carla's church is this creepy. Gloomy little rooms up front; a sinister balcony. I bet a hunchback lives in the balcony. The smell of the whole place is rancid. I try to count the candles at the front of the church but I keep losing my place and have to start over.

A choir, too, lives in the balcony--the choir is what gets the ball rolling, not by singing but by half-talking and half-crying. There's no organ. Wes starts with his bawling again, immediately, and Mom gets up with him. I watch her float out the back door. How soothing it would be for the angel Gabriel to float in and sit between Sophie and me. Maybe he would come with reindeer, maybe he would bring presents.

Instead, an old man in a gown walks through the doors. He carries a smoking silver ball that hangs on a silver chain. The more he swings the ball and chain, the more the smoke poofs out and up our noses. It stinks--stinks *bad*, not like Uncle Bill's cigarettes' smoke or campfire smoke. It's like old moth balls, dust, honey--all mixed together. Sophie glares at me again. I search for Dad on the other side of the church because Sophie and I shouldn't be left alone like this.

The old man in the gown half-talks, half-cries in Ukrainian. He is Father Zubritsky, the priest. His favorite phrase seems to be *hospody pomylo* and variations of it--which, I think, must mean *stand up* and *sit down*. We go up, praysilently, praymumbling, praypraypray. Down. Up. Listen pray OUT LOUD down, up listen! downup up for no reason down. I try to guess when the *hospody*, up/down, will come but it's hopeless. I have to watch everyone else for a cue; everyone else seems to watch everyone else.

I wonder who we're all following. It can't be Father Zubritsky, for he stands the whole time. It's not the people in front of us--I watch them closely--they follow somebody in front of them. The more up and down we go now, the happier I am. I want to determine who's leading us. Someone in the front row, someone who speaks Ukrainian. Someone who goes to church regularly. Someone who must actually *like* Father Zubritsky.

I think that it's my cousin Kalyna, who is actually my mother's age. Sometimes we call her Kooky Kalyna, behind her back. We never call her anything to her face. We never talk to her, face to face. Not me, not Sophie; not our cousins Dalia, Orysia, Dean, Wayne. She looks normal but there's something wrong with Kalyna--mentally, that is. Not that she was always that way--mentally. It was only after she grew up that she started acting funny, I think. I can't be sure. I ask my Mom about it and she says ask Dad who says it's a long story and he'll tell me someday when I'm older. I'm sure it's Kalyna, though. I'm sure it's *Kalyna* who everyone in church is watching. She gets up first, she sits down first--as long as I watch her, I keep in time with Father Zubritsky. I don't know how she can do it, being not mentally normal and all.

I get a car-sick feeling from the up-down motion and the smoke. Even Auntie Mary's perfume is starting to get to me so I lean hard on Sophie to get away. Sophie pushes me the other way and I push back. I put my mouth on her ear, to say, Soph, I'm gonna throw up. Sophie doesn't look so well herself. She was much braver when church began; now, she's frightening me. Out of the blue, she grabs my hand and holds it, hard. I think I'm going to cry or puke. Or both, all over my sunshine suit, all over the Bible in front of me. Father Zubritsky switches to English then, at last. Maybe he switches because he sees that he's losing me.

Carla's priest must be a nicer man. I imagine that he's young, has no accent, doesn't yell. I bet he *smiles* and doesn't spit. Or maybe he's old, with a fat stomach and a white beard, like Santa and Gabriel. When Father Zubritsky talks about Gabriel, though--in English--he describes a big jerk, a big meanie who's going to decide whether I go up or down when I die. Because I'm young, Father Zubritsky thinks I'll go down. All of us young people, according to Father Zubritsky, are going straight down. Because we don't speak our mother tongue, we never go to *charuch*. Because we never go to *charuch*, the *charuch* is dying. And without the *charuch* we are all going to spend eternity with Satan.

Near the end of the service, Father Zubritsky asks everyone to stand in line and to kiss a big gold Bible. Everyone kisses it and he doesn't even wipe it between people. After the cross-kissing line, we stand in another line, the *floor*-kissing line. We kneel on the floor and touch our foreheads down, twelve times. I wonder, What if Auntie Pearl stepped in one of Uncle Charlie's cow's poop and that poop rubbed off on the floor and that floor rubs off on my head? I hate Father Zubritsky for making me do this. I hate Wes because he doesn't have to do this, he's still outside with my mother. I hate my father because he *knew* I would have to do this and he didn't warn me.

Above all, I hate Carla.

And, yet, in the silence of the car ride home from Szypenitz, I have a dilemma. I hate Carla Senko but I still need a best friend. *Never go to church again, lose Carla; go to church, keep Carla.* Carla has the best sleepovers. At her sleepovers, we ride bikes with Michael Holowaychuk and Peter Eliuk. Carla is cruel, though. She doesn't talk to me when she's with Laurie-Anne or Sara.

Go to church, keep Father Zubritsky; never go to church again, get Satan. I close my eyes and build an imaginary scale for Father Zubritsky and Satan--Father Zubritsky in his long black dress with his long pointy beard and his smoking ball and chain; Satan in his long red dress with his short pointy beard and his pitchfork. Father Zubritsky's side of the scale wobbles a little lower than Satan's, then Satan's side dips below Father Zubritsky's. Carla Senko hops from one side of the scale to the other in her skin tight Jordache jeans.

I love summer, I love campfires, I love heat. I like to go brown and run around with no shirt on the North Side of Wolf Lake. I think so long as Mom, Dad, Sophie, and Wes are with me and we've got wieners, hell will be a lot like Wolf Lake. On Tuesday after Easter weekend, I put Carla Senko's gold cross in my sock drawer, right at the bottom.

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The story of Salina and Barry starts two weeks after I arrive in Toronto. Or, just after I leave for Toronto, when my mother in St. Paul called Auntie Marika in Willingdon, who in turn called her best friend Kay Woycenko in Edmonton whose grandson lives in Toronto. That's Barry, the grandson. Barry Woycenko. It takes two weeks for the arrangements to be made--for my mother to pass my phone number along to Marika, who in turn passed it on to Kay, who in turn passed it on to Barry.

When I first meet Barry, he asks why I didn't just look for his name in the phone book. I don't have one, I say, feeling stupid. I don't have a phone book. I don't know where to get one.

Barry notices that I'm blushing uncontrollably, I'm sure, but he pretends not to notice. Instead, he says, No matter, we'll get you a phone book. We'll get you *ten* phone books if you want! He grins, then, pulling me toward the car in which his friend is waiting. Barry has come--with a friend--to pick me up, show me around Toronto.

Salina is Barry's friend and she has been waiting for us in front of my apartment in a Chrysler New Yorker. It's the biggest car I've ever seen, ever in my life, but it's very plush inside, with automatic windows and door-locks. Salina is smoking inside, puffing the car full of smoke, and listening to classical Indian music on the car stereo. She seems nice. Nicer than Barry, possibly, because I feel almost at ease with her--which I don't often feel with girls.

I've generally had no luck with girlfriends, from Carla Senko on, so I just can't entirely trust Salina. Barry and Salina--*friends*? Forget it. They have to be sleeping together, is what I tell myself, which means she's going to despise and distrust me eventually, no matter what I say, no matter what I do. We'll have a big blow-out one day and she'll throw something. Or else we'll just stop talking to each other. That's the way it goes with girls whenever a man is involved.

Salina offers me a cigarette when I get in the car, Barry lights it for me. Bad. Without a doubt, this will bother Salina. His hands are lovely, I notice, very clean fingernails. Wavy blond hair, blue eyes. He looks like a lifeguard. At least six feet tall, I think. I wonder if he's a good kisser. Is his penis big? This is why I can't get along with women.

Before we see Toronto, we're stopping at Salina's for a couple of drinks. Along the way, in the middle of the conversation, Barry asks if I smoke. Of course I smoke, I say. Couldn't they see me smoking right there, in the car? But they mean *smoke* smoke, smoke *drugs* smoke. I'm not sure how to say no, it makes me puke, I've tried but. I suppose it's enough that I fidget. The conversation moves on.

After we arrive at Salina's place, Barry heads straight to the kitchen, declaring that he will make supper. Definitely not the Ukrainian guy I expected. He opens a bottle of wine while the three of us plan the evening. CN Tower first thing--their treat, as it costs a fortune to go up to the top. After that, a quick look at the Skydome, a tour of the U of T campus, a few minutes by Lake Ontario. Then, on to the Future Bakery and Cafe for the rest of the night, where the *Kids in the Hall* hang out.

Do I watch *Kids in the Hall*? they ask. I shake my head. They've got to initiate me, then. Barry says, Throw in a video, Saleen!

I'm jealous. I hope he'll give me a nickname after we get to know each other. I hope we'll get to know each other.

Barry and Salina think it's *très* cool that I'm into music and a music career and all that. Barry works at a place on Yonge and Bloor--*definite* possibilities for gigs there. It's a Sports Pub, he says, but, you know, the owner's a really cool guy. Plus Salina goes to the University of Toronto and there are tons of opportunities on campus, tons. *Tons*.

I discover that Salina is taking dance I didn't know you could take dance at university. I didn't know dancers could have such big boobs. Hers are enormous. She doesn't look anything like a real dancer to me. Real dancers' ribs should stick out, not their boobs. I assume that she's wearing a push-up bra. A too-*small* push-up bra, if you ask me. Everyone can see the lines across her chest where the edges of the cups are cutting into her breasts and where her breasts themselves are bulging out of the cups. She needs a new bra, clearly; in a bigger size. I can't stop looking at her boobs. Barry must love them.

Barry is majoring in English, except I don't quite understand how he could be majoring in anything when he's only taking one night class. The class is in World

Literature. He says that he's reading Nadine Gordimer at the moment which makes me snort.

Really, I say. Is she a good book?

Well, *Burger's Daughter*, he says.

You know, I say, I lived in Africa for a couple of years.

No shit, he says, what part?

South, I say. And I actually met Nadine Gordimer.

Really? he says.

Really. She's very short.

I look up to see how Saleen would react to this: Barry being my type, me being Barry's type, me liking Barry more and more. Africa is my secret weapon. It attracts attention, starts conversations. Men like exotic things. Barry asked if I've ever been to Zimbabwe. I haven't. He homes in so rapidly on the big regret of my life--not going to Zimbabwe--that we must have a cosmic connection. Everyone always wants to know if I've seen the Victoria Falls. How could you have been that close and not have seen the Victoria Falls? Barry is the first person who doesn't seem to mind that I missed the Vic Falls.

Just as well, he says. The whole world should boycott Zimbabwe.

I'm not sure where this is going, but I don't think I like it. It smells like an ivory discussion. Sir Richard Attenborough's name will come up. Or is it Richard Leakey? I can't be sure. One Richard makes films and the other burns ivory. Barry will sing praises of the Richard who burns ivory and I'll be forced to make the opposing case. It might well be the end of Barry and me, depending how naive he is about saving the world.

I'll bring out my ivory pendant for a prop, talk about culling and wildlife management--can't forget the cows. Sometimes I forget to mention the cows and then my argument falls flat on its face. Cows are not meant to live in Africa. They're plagued with ticks and flies and diseases and malnourishment--and they're just a status symbol for African men anyway. If African men ranched animals that are indigenous to the continent, they would thrive--the people and the animals. Then we could buy ivory safely and legally, genuinely helping third world economies. Oo. Third world economics, that's a big can of worms to open. I hope Barry won't call for Africa to go vegetarian. It would never work.

When Barry doesn't go the way of ivory, I'm thrown off balance momentarily. He talks, instead, about a book fair or conference or something that was shut down in Zimbabwe. Something about homophobia--news to me. Not homophobia but the incident in Zimbabwe. Not that I'm surprised. Zimbabwe, I think, is afraid of sex in general. I tell Barry and Salina about an all-girls school in Zimbabwe that I've heard about--a school in which long-handled hair brushes were banned. Salina gets quite excited.

She says, What, did they ban right hands in the boys' schools?

Exactly.

Then, while Barry gets up to open another bottle of wine, Salina asks me what it was like in Africa--what it was *really* like. Did it change the way I look at the world? Do I miss it? Do I want to go back? Did I fall in love?

This is a first. Girls never ask me much about Africa. They ask if I liked it *down there*, if I was scared, if I got malaria--questions that can be answered in one word, yes, or no. Sometimes they say that it was awfully brave of me to go at such a young age. Usually, though, they turn the conversation to themselves, to what they were doing when they were sixteen. To their own travels. Miami at spring break, Mazatlan at Christmas. They talk about their favourite rum drinks, and the worm at the bottom of the tequila.

What I tell Salina is that there is a saying in Africa. Once you've touched the waters of the Zambezi, you're destined to return.

What I think about is the guava juice. They served us guava juice morning, noon, and night at the college--pale pink and watery, with seeds that stuck between your teeth when you drank it. I hear the headmaster's voice droning through the assembly hall while I rubbed the sleep from my eyes--*We are all of the earth, which does not see differences of colour, religion, or race. We are 'Kamhlaba,' all of one world.* I see stick bugs sleeping in my sandals at the bottom of my cupboard, Christmas beetles burrowing in my bedsheets. I smell incense, thick and sweet, burning in the Indian girl's room beside me.

Do I miss it? All of it. But, no, I never fell in love. My best friend Rosa did. Rosa fell in love. And, yes, after that, everything changed.

Salina asks about the river, then. The Zambezi. What was it *really* like?

I shrug. I don't know. I've never seen it myself.

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Miss Maximchuk has the biggest boobs we've ever seen. They don't sag, either: because, according to Carla Senko, Miss Maximchuk wears a full support bra. Since grade four, when Carla started wearing a bra herself, she has been the bra expert. She knows things about bras our mothers don't even know--about push-ups, underwires, Y-backs; strapless, seamless, back clasp, front clasp, no clasp.

The girls in our class know that Carla didn't need a bra in grade four--she doesn't even need one now, in grade seven. But none of us would tell her that. I wouldn't. Sarah H. wouldn't; neither would Sarah M., Michelle, or Jessie. It's as though we're always dancing the butterfly at school, with Carla in the middle--sometimes she takes Sarah H. and Sarah M. for her partners, sometimes Michelle and Jessie, sometimes Michelle and me. We all want to be her permanent partner, her real best friend, so none of us ever stand up to her when she's mean. Which is nearly always.

Now that we're in grade seven, Carla spends more and more time with Sarah H., they live two houses away from each other. They have sleepovers every weekend, and they phone Michael Holowaychuk and Peter Eliuk. Carla and Sarah H. are both on the volleyball team and in Miss Maximchuk's French class. They both wear bras, which I have no need of. When I see Carla and Sarah H. with their perky little tits under their volleyball jerseys, I think that there is nothing on earth I'd rather have than breasts. Big, round, with nipples that show.

When I see Miss Maximchuk, though, I edit my desires--not too big. Not big like cantaloupes. Not with pointy brown disks that show--huge--through white blouses, like oven dials. Like peanut butter cups. I know exactly the size and shape of the boobs I want, though I don't know how I'll get them that way. There are exercises in Michelle's *Cosmo*, some hints in Judy Blume books--*we must we must we must increase our bust.*

Increase? No. That's too general, dangerous. I don't want my chest to increase uncontrollably.

Maybe I should try the exercises, though. When Miss Maximchuk first came to our school and started teaching French at the beginning of grade six, Michael Holowaychuk switched from Ukrainian to French. In the middle of grade seven, Peter followed. It must be for the boobs. I can't find another reason. Michael and Peter are both Ukrainian; they took Ukrainian from grade four onward. Their switches bother me, not only because I like Michael, but because there are now only seven of us left in Ukrainian. We started with nineteen. One student switched to Cree right off the bat, three moved away in grade five, and eight changed to Miss Maximchuk's class. Eight. I'm starting to wonder if they'll let us keep taking Ukrainian at all. We've never had such a small class.

And it doesn't help that my mother teaches Ukrainian. It doesn't help at all. I know she's older and meaner than Miss Maximchuk; I know that her breasts are babies compared to Miss Maximchuk's. In Ukrainian, we don't do fun skits, like they do in French. We don't bring in pea soup and meat pies; we don't learn to jig and play the spoons.

The French kids, led by Carla, make a point of asking us what exactly we do in Ukrainian. Why do we use such funny letters? It's hard to explain that in Ukrainian class we read those funny letters aloud, in unison; that we practice declensions, in unison. That all week we memorize, on our own, the masculines, the feminines, and the neuters so that my mother can quiz us every Friday. That if we do well, as a group, we play Bingo the following Monday, to learn our numbers.

We say nothing. Those of us left in Ukrainian are a timid collection of fraidy-cats. Pussies, Michael calls us, except that he pronounces it with a Ukrainian accent to poke fun. *Poosies.*

At times, I don't want my mother to be teaching Ukrainian at all. I want her to move to grade one or grade two. Or junior high science. I don't want to see her four times a week; I don't want her to see me. And seeing is all we do of each other, for I am afraid that if I open my mouth around her, I will call her "Mom" and get teased. She is afraid that if she calls on me too much in class, word will get around that she favors me, so she doesn't call on me at all. Four times a week we stare at each other.

Sometimes, though, in Ukrainian class, when the other six are answering Mom's usual question--*sohodni iaka pohoda*, what's the weather like today?--I devise ways of improving Mom's class, giving Miss Maximchuk a run for her money, winning back all the Ukrainian students. We could make *pyrohy* every Friday, instead of writing the weekly quiz. We could learn Ukrainian dancing--at least the simple steps. I could help. I want Mom to grow her nails long and paint them with clear polish, like Miss Maximchuk. I want Mom to wear pink miniskirts and tight white blouses.

I have a year's worth of *sohodni iaka pohoda* ideas by the time Mom comes around to taking action. But when she does, when she does take action, I fight it. She wants to make *pysanky* in her Ukrainian classes--first she'll demonstrate and then she'll let us make our own. It's just plain retarded, and I tell her so. Of all the plans I dreamed up--we could plan a tour of the Ukrainian Village at Elk Island! A field trip to see the *Shumka* dancers! *Baba* could be a guest speaker! Cousin Wayne could come and play his *tsymbaly*!--she chooses *pysanky*. I never once mentioned *pysanky*.

I tell Mom that the kids in class could never handle it. There will be broken eggs all over her classroom--on desks, books, cupboards, the floor. No janitor in his right mind--and especially not Mr. Dairy--is going to clean it up. The Ukrainian students aren't old enough, not mature enough, not smart enough. I try everything. They won't get it, they won't understand the process. Where will she get the materials? The school won't buy the *kistkas*.

As Mom works out the details on a pad of paper, on the kitchen table, with Sophie giving her suggestions and Dad picking out *pysanky* patterns, I go to the bathroom to cry. The tears don't come at first, though I'd really like them to. I sit on the toilet and flip the toilet paper roll and, in my mind, I curse Carla Senko. I know that she is going to make fun of our *pysanky*, I just don't know how she'll do it. I can't anticipate precisely what's to come but I must prepare. I must get the tears out now.

So I think back, on all the times Carla's humiliated me at school, and all the times I never fought back. When she called me Uke Puke in front of Michael; when she was my best friend until our science project was done and then couldn't even pick me for her team in phys. ed. Thinking about phys. ed. always does it. I start to wind the toilet paper around my hand to sop up the tears and the snot.

Then I imagine that I am protecting all the world's *pysanky*, that I am a big hen perched on a mountain of eggs. My predator is pretty. Foxes are. And cunning. She wants the eggs and she'll do anything for them. It's a game to her, and a dance. She moves at once like an athlete and a ballerina trying to get at my eggs. She teases me and calls me cruel names. But she can't hurt me. I know that I am a plain old hen, ugly even, but I can protect my eggs with my patience. She will tire of cursing me and dancing about.

And if she doesn't tire, I will fight back, for I am a hen with teeth, secret teeth. When the fox comes too close, I will be forced to bite her. I will bite her cheeks and blood will pump out in little spurts. I will bite her neck, her arms, her legs--I will bite and bite and bite until her whole body has become a little sprinkler, speckling the earth around her with blood. Only, I won't let her blood soak the soil--no--I will collect it and make red dye from it and make more *pysanky* with it.

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The day after I meet Barry and Salina, they bring me house-warming gifts, second hand, from Kensington Market. One mauve bean-bag chair, a four-cup, off-white tea kettle, and two matching yellow and orange casserole dishes. Barry finds phone books for me and lends me an answering machine--the debris, he says, of an old roommate. While he sits on the floor of my room, fiddling with the machine, I consider heading out to the TD bank six blocks down, to open a new account. Salina is taking her car to Canadian Tire. She says that I need dishes, glasses, cups, cutlery, and a toaster.

Salina is completely double-jointed and perpetually stretching and so, as she tells Barry and me that she is going to Canadian Tire, she lifts her right leg up to her right ear. Then she collapses onto the floor, spreading her legs into a wide V and wrapping her hands around her ankles, her entire torso flat against the floor. I watch her and I watch Barry's reaction to her for signs of lust.

But Barry doesn't take his eyes off the answering machine. He says, Test, test into the microphone and, then, Saleen, pick me up a pack of smokes would you if it's not out of your way. He presses Stop, Rewind, and then Play. Saleen, pick me up a pack of smokes would you if it's not out of your way.

She lifts her left leg up to her left ear and says, Sure, lets her leg drop, says, Sure again, and walks out the door.

Walking to the bank, past the Portuguese billiards and the Portuguese Laundromat, I wonder if Barry and Salina are private people. Maybe they have an arrangement. Barry's not comfortable with public displays of affection; he's asked Salina not to hold his hand unless they're alone. He doesn't want me to feel as though I don't belong, like a third-wheel, the odd-one-out. I imagine Barry giving Salina explicit instructions--Hands-off when Colleen is around, she's just moved to a strange place, she's all alone, she's got no friends, no family, the last thing she needs is to witness a couple in love. Salina agrees, I imagine. She says, Poor Colleen, poor thing. I cringe at the condescending tone in her voice. How can Barry stand it?

Piano shop, convenience store, café, butchery. Or maybe they really are friends. Good friends, close friends. The best of friends--like brother and sister. Maybe Barry calls Salina for advice at all hours of the day and night. Saleen, I'm nuts about her. Nuts. I'm crazy about her. I can't stop thinking about her. I can't sleep. She lived in Africa. Can you believe it? *Africa*. I've always wanted to go to Africa. And she's Ukrainian, for

Christ's sake, of all things to be she's *Ukrainian*. My family's going to be nuts about her, too. It's crazy, Saleen, I know it's crazy, I know I'm crazy, you're going to call me crazy, but I think it's no coincidence that she moved here. No accident. I think it's meant to be, I think it's fate, destiny, karma, whatever. I think this is it. I think I've found her, I think she's the *one*.

By the time I open the doors of the TD, I can hear an imaginary organist playing an imaginary rendition of "Canon in D." I am ready to walk down the aisle, dressed in white, of course--something long and white and simple, nothing garish, tendrils of baby's breath tucked into my hair. For a bouquet--roses, maybe, or orchids. Anything, really, but starburst lilies. They smell of funerals to me.

As I reach the counter of the bank, I can hear Barry say, In sickness and in health, his voice trembling, his chin quivering, tears in his eyes. I am ready for my father first to shake Barry's hand and then to embrace Barry, like a son. My brother Wes will pass the ring to Barry, and my sister Sophie will hold my bouquet while Barry slips the ring on my finger. For the recessional, the organist will play Mendelssohn's "Wedding March."

Salina, I think, will be seated by herself in the last pew, near the church doors, where Barry and I will stop for our second kiss as husband and wife. I will turn to Salina and wave.

Poor Colleen indeed.

***

My mother says that if I never learn to sing *Ave Maria*, the most beautiful wedding song of all time, she will go to her grave with a broken heart. When she wants something, she talks this way. She says that, since I will be asked to sing *Ave Maria* at a wedding sooner or later, I might as well learn it now, and she buys me sheet music for the Bach *Ave Maria*, then a cassette tape of Nana Mouskouri singing the Schubert *Ave Maria*. You choose, she says, I love them both. On her twenty-year-old typewriter, she translates the Latin words into phonetics--*Ah-vay Maree-ya*--so that I will make no mistakes in pronunciation.

By the time the news of Dean-and-Diana's engagement reaches our household--via the BBC, *Baba Babi Cazala*, one *Baba* tells another *Baba*--I have learned to sing the Bach and Sophie has learned to play the Bach. Dean is my cousin, my rich Auntie-Helen-and-Uncle-Dan's son. Diana is the fiancée. The wedding date, May long weekend. At the Royal Glenora Club in Edmonton.

On the BBC, there is talk of the meal being catered--not only catered but served rather than buffet-style. Fifty dollars a plate, Uncle Bill has heard, and not one Ukrainian dish on the menu. Auntie Rose has it from a reliable source that the flowers will be ordered not from Auntie Pearl--Auntie Pearl who has a shop in Two Hills and who takes care of the flowers for every family wedding--but from a flower shop on Jasper Avenue. From Auntie Natalka, the first to receive an invitation, comes a report that her son Steve has not been included on the guest list. Auntie Rose calls Auntie Natalka--has she been asked to the Second Day? To the Gift Opening? Auntie Pearl calls Auntie Natalka, Auntie Natalka calls Auntie Marika. Marika to my mother, my mother back to Pearl. Pearl to Rose, Rose to Pearl. The aunts are calling it the "Royal Wedding," blaming Dean's fiancée--"Lady Di."

As the wedding day approaches, Sophie and I wait to hear from Dean and Diana--confident that we will hear from them, for we are the wedding family. We come as a wedding package. Wes is the ring bearer, Mom is the bridesmaid. At church and in the hall, Sophie plays and I sing. Dad is the M.C. We've done this routine for Darlene and Rick, Orysia and Danny, Paul and Kelly, Sonya and Robert.

The older Wes gets, of course, the less cute he becomes, so Sophie and I think that the advent of the video camera is a blessing. Wes can videotape all the weddings when he's no longer young enough and cute enough to be in the wedding parties. When Sophie gets older, on the other hand, she'll probably take Mom's place as bridesmaid. Mom will graduate to the kitchen, in the hall, where she will help her sisters prepare the wedding supper, then wash the dishes after it has been eaten. But Dad will always be the M.C. and I will always sing.

I will always sing and I will always puke, as I have always sung and as I have always puked. Poor Colleen, Mom always says outside my toilet cubicle to the other ladies in the washroom. She gets so nervous, poor thing. Get it all out quickly, dear, I hear her laugh. The ladies always give me advice. Take deep breaths, pretend everyone in the audience is nude! Sophie always holds my hair back while I heave into the toilet. She says, Concentrate on me, not on those old bats. Sing for *me*.

On the Sunday before the wedding, Sophie and I realize that something's up: we've got the invitation, but Dean hasn't called, or Diana. Or Auntie Helen, or Uncle Dan. Not that we expect Dean or Uncle Dan to call--it's usually the women who organize the wedding details. The men just order the booze. Maybe they're behind schedule with their planning; they're waiting until the last minute to ask us. They forgot. It's been canceled. The wedding's off?

Mom calls Auntie Jean. No word on a cancellation, according to Auntie Jean, but the latest is that the marriage ceremony will be conducted entirely in English. Auntie Natalka confirms that there will be no Ukrainian spoken in church and adds that wedding guests must pay cash for their drinks at this wedding.

Conversations on the BBC Hot Line reach a feverish pitch with news of the cash bar. Mom is forced to pull the telephone away from her ear when she calls Auntie Mary. Across the kitchen we can hear the bellowing of Uncle Andy's voice through the receiver. Since when? Since *when* do we pay to go to a wedding? Pay to go to a goddamn wedding! Who opened their wallets at my son's wedding? Now that was a wedding. Food, drink, music. *That* was a wedding, a real wedding, a goddamn real Ukrainian wedding. *Nai shliak ta ba trafiv*, goddamn *chewtobachnik*. I'd sooner go to my grave than go to this Englishman-wedding.

But we all go--Uncle Andy included--in suits and dresses, ties and nylons; shoe-polished, powdered, pressed, and high-heeled. Sophie in her orange sundress, me in my lemon miniskirt, brastraps pinned to the shoulders of my blouse. Sophie and I have decided to ignore the long faces of our uncles and the whispers of our aunts, for we know that this is the first--maybe the only--wedding at which I will sit through church and supper and speeches without puking even once.

The fact is, Sophie whispers to me during the drive to Edmonton, that the aunts bitch and bitch about having to make wedding meals at every wedding, every single one.

This is their long-awaited, well-earned break. Auntie Natalka hasn't said a word to Steve in six years, ever since he married that divorcee, eighteen years older than him--what does Auntie Natalka care if Steve's not invited? Plus no one has ever been impressed with Auntie Pearl's flower arrangements, she's cheap with the baby's breath. And, as for the price tags on drinks--we're not old enough anyway.

Sophie and I vow to have a good time, to party on. Our secret signal--the party-on signal--is the right hand curled into a fist, the right arm thrust up in the air. In church, it's difficult to make the signal without drawing attention to ourselves, so Sophie nudges me with her elbow and then makes a little horizontal punch with her right fist. She is reminding me that, whereas I would usually be throwing up at this time and she would usually be wiping me up, we are, today, free to party-on. Another girl is singing. Fiona.

I would like to make the secret signal in Fiona's face, to stop her--or slow her down at the very least--from butchering *Ave Maria*. *Ave Maria*, of all things. She sings it double-time. Of course, I would sing it double-time too if my voice were that weak. To further compensate for the fact that she can't sustain a note, Fiona holds the microphone right against her lips, which makes her p's and b's explode. Amateur. When she hits her first semi-gutsy note, the mike squeals. Surprise. Any semi-experienced, semi-talented singer would pull the mike away on the loud notes. It seems to me she's had voice lessons because she's concentrating too much on rounding her lips and dropping her jaw and rolling her r's. I don't think about my mouth when I sing, or my lips or my tongue. Instead, I tell myself that my voice is an arrow and that I must send it powerfully and precisely. Fiona's voice is a half-dead jackfish, hooked in the gills, drowning in air.

Because of Fiona--Fiona in her mauve party dress and her matching mauve gloves and her matching mauve hat--I pay no attention to the entrance of the bride and I miss most of the marriage ceremony itself. I want to be up front with the organist. I want people to look at *me*, not Fiona; I can sing better than her. I whisper in Sophie's ear a hundred times before Mom gives me a poke and a dirty look.

The guests' tables are round, with bright white tablecloths. The head table is long and rectangular, decorated with big white bows and bunches of white flowers and leaves, all strung together with vines--which must be fake, I think. Where can you get real vines in Alberta? Besides the vines, everything else here is white. The tablecloths, the napkins, the flowers, the bows, the cake. The limo, the tuxes, the candles, the centerpieces on the tables, the tables. Even the bridesmaids' dresses, and the bridesmaids themselves--they look like they haven't had any sun in years.

Sophie and I sit together--in our assigned spots, at the very back of the hall, behind two pillars and the bar, with the rest of my mother's family--sipping our orange pops, and sulking. We've never been assigned spots before. We're nervous. We hardly speak, and when we do, it's in whispers. We're afraid that if we move, we'll touch something white and dirty it.

It's hot in the hall. My hands start to feel sticky and the skin on the underparts of my legs, between my knees and my bum, attaches itself to my chair. Why did I wear such a short dress? And so yellow. I feel like a blob of chewed lemon bubble gum, warming and spreading. Fiona is a tidy little *un*chewed grape Chiclet. I look for her. Her assigned spot is up front.

I think that the uncles and the aunts don't like the idea of assigned spots either. They're all sitting quietly, barely talking let alone laughing. Sophie says it's the white-washed atmosphere, too clinical. At a wedding, says Sophie, the bride's gown should be the only all-white thing. I disagree. The food, too, should be white, or nearly white. *Pyrohy, nelesneky, holubtsi, pyrizhky*. I point to the food in front of us--green Brussels sprouts, orange carrots, red potatoes--and raise my eyebrows. Who wants to eat *this* at a wedding?

For dessert, we are served something brownish and semi-sweet and coagulated that looks like a poached egg in syrup. I almost gag. At a real wedding, after a real supper, we get up, stretch our legs, and help ourselves to real dessert--squares. Twenty different kinds, at least. Auntie Mary's Matrimonial Squares, with dates and oatmeal; Auntie Linda's Seven-Layer Squares with coconut and butterscotch chips; Auntie Rose's Rhubarb Delights, Minnesota Bars, and Rocky Road Fudge; Mom's Cookie Sheet Brownies and Poppyseed *Pompushky*.

At a real wedding, we all sit at long, rectangular tables, wrapped in white paper--we sit wherever they please. There are bells, streamers, and balloons and two big cardboard hearts, joined together with the name of the bride and the name of the groom written in sparkles. Across the head table, we lay a piece of embroidered cloth and, on it, a jar of salt and the *korovai*, with tiny dough birdies squatting in golden braids of bread. Before the meal, we have a Ukrainian blessing and an English blessing. At a real wedding, Uncle Dave and Uncle Charlie and Uncle Andy take turns going to the bar during the meal, each bringing back to the table a tray of drinks in plastic glasses. From time to time while we eat, we clank our forks against our plates--to make the newlyweds kiss; we sing *Mna Haia Lita* for the couple at least two times. And, at a real wedding, as the speeches begin, the men pull hankies from their pockets, so that the women will have something with which to wipe their eyes.

But at Dean and Diana's wedding, we--who are far from the podium and blocked by the pillars and the bar--can hardly see who is speaking much less hear what is being said. Instead, we feel the rumble of the crowd when someone at the microphone makes a joke. We miss the Toast to the Bride completely, and the Toast to the Groom, and when a streak of mauve takes her place behind the mike, all we can really make out are the p's and b's of "You Light Up My Life." Wes sticks his finger in his throat. Sophie giggles. Uncle Eddie snorts. Dad glares.

It doesn't matter, anyway, is what I think, since nobody in the hall can really hear or see us. Dad must come around to thinking this, too, because he leans over to Uncle Dave a few times and then they head over to the bar. That's better. I feel relieved. They have to ask for them, of course, as the drinks at this bar come in glass glasses, but they get them--the real plastic glasses.

Auntie Helen and Uncle Dan are the last to speak. They start at 9:36 and talk until 10:17, Wes times them. They talk and talk. All we can hear are boom-booms, lower when Uncle Dan takes the mike and a little higher when Auntie Helen speaks. After ten minutes or so, Sophie and I make our way to the front and stand by the wall, promising to report what we hear to the family. Wes tags along.

Auntie Helen thanks certain people for coming--Uncle Dan's business colleagues, mostly, who work with him in the industry. The oil industry, she means. Uncle Dan cuts in and makes some jokes about the industry, and all the people in the front--industry people, I suppose--slap each other's back and chuckle. Auntie Helen thanks the world-class florist--from Mexico but trained in Portugal to work exclusively with orchids--and the world-class chef--flown in from Paris three days ago--and the world-class photographer--New York-based. In front of the pillars, the ladies wear long gowns and big, gold hoops on their ears. The men don't wear regular suits--like my uncles and my dad--they wear tuxes, like the groomsmen, with real cufflinks. Sophie, Wes, and I look like little brown Indian kids--brown from the weekends we helped Dad and Uncle Bill pick rocks by Kaleland--standing against the wall and staring. Looking in, from the outside.

Uncle Dan takes over again, describing the difficulties the bride encountered in selecting her bridal gown. Our eyes are wide when we hear that she couldn't find anything she liked in Seattle, Vancouver, Toronto, or Montreal. We've never been to these places. Uncle Dan says that Auntie Helen had to bring Diana to a designer in London. London, *England*. And, wouldn't you know it, says Auntie Helen, taking over from Uncle Dan, the silk the designer needed was nowhere to be found in the Western World--the crowd rumbles at the joke--so it was off to the Orient. The *Orient*.

Sophie and I simultaneously turn our heads to look at the bride, whose gown is long and white and has sleeves. From looking at the gown, it's hard to tell the difference between it and every other wedding gown in the Western World. Unable to stop ourselves, Sophie and I cover our mouths and giggle into our hands. All the heads at the tables closest to us turn and stare. Auntie Helen's head turns our way, as well. She gives us a horrified look, a look of embarrassment, disgust, reprimand. We are out of place, out of our assigned spots, on the wrong side of the pillars. Sophie and I blush and start to move back to our table. We have long forgotten to party on and long abandoned the secret party-on signal.

At a real wedding, the band starts with a few old-time waltzes, seven-steps, and fox-trots. After their first break, they play the schottische and the heel-toe, and the bird dance, if it's requested. Polkas and butterflies just before midnight, when the fiddler and the *tsymbaly* player are warmed up; the *kolomyika* just after midnight, before they're too warmed up with liquor. The uncles take turns on the dance floor with the girl-cousins, half-carrying us as they twirl us around. Once in a while they take their wives for a slow two-step--if the band can manage "In the Mood," Mom and Dad jive--but mostly the women sit and talk after the meal and the dishes have been done.

This is not a real wedding, for this is not a real band. There is no accordion, no *tsymbaly*. Nine musicians on stage, and not one of them plays the fiddle. Two play trumpets, one plays the trombone; piano player, upright bassist, three singers, and a drummer. I was hoping for the Melodizers from Mundare in their matching black slacks and light blue velour shirts. This band--orchestra, really--doesn't have a name, even, and they wear tuxedos. When the band starts playing and when the industry people start stepping onto the dance floor, the uncles gather in bunches, leaning on the pillars, talking low and shaking their heads; the aunts cross their arms and their legs, press their lips together, and glance at their watches. It sounds like elevator Muzak. For us, there is no dancing.

At exactly midnight, the band stops and there is some commotion on stage. The throwing of the bouquet, Sophie whispers to me, smiling. It's time for the bride to throw her flowers, and for the groom to throw her garter. We make our way toward the middle of the dance floor, for we are single girls and therefore eligible to catch the bouquet. Fiona, too, I notice, is walking towards the dance floor. I'm going to stand beside her so that I can push her out of the way when the time comes--push her hard, so that she falls on her little mauve ass and shows the crowd her mauve panties. It will be her best performance of the day.

Only, Fiona doesn't stop at the dance floor, she heads straight for the stage, mauve heels clickety-clacking on the hard wood. I don't think I can bear it. I don't think I can bear another of her songs. But here it comes, her grand finale, a special song for the special couple.

It sounds like every other song she's sung tonight: weak, flimsy, bloodless, uninspired. Like the singer herself. *I am your lady and you are my man*, give me a break. She looks like she's all of nine years old, ten at the most. She's got nerve. *Whenever you reach for me I'll do all that I can*. I imagine Fiona, on stage, reaching her hand out to me, on the dance floor. I smile up at her, and hold her bony little hand in mine, as though I'm helping her down. Then I squeeze. I grip her wrist with one hand and her marbly knuckles in the other; I pull her down, nose-first, onto the floor, and the mike is mine.

Nobody takes notice of Fiona bawling her bulgy eyes out, her nose leaking blood and snot all over her mauve party-dress, because they're all transfixed by my singing.

Halfway through Fiona's last song, Kalyna appears at my side, my cousin Kalyna, Auntie Mary's daughter. I shift my weight from one foot to the other and look for Sophie, who is on the other side of the dance floor, getting us two more glasses of pop. Sophie and I have been avoiding Kalyna, like we always do, since we don't know how to talk to her, what kinds of things we should say. There's no way to predict what planet Kalyna is on, she randomly selects the stuff she talks about. She never makes sense. Half the time she doesn't recognize her own mother. Now that she is beside me, I want to walk away. I'm scared of her. She might drool, or touch me. The scariest part is that we have something in common, we have the same name. Hers is the Ukrainian version of mine; mine, the English version of hers.

When Fiona's song is finished and people are clapping and the band is preparing to start up again, Kalyna turns to me and smiles. She leans over close to my face, so close that I can feel her mouth warm on my neck, and cups her hands around my ear, as if she has a secret to tell me. Mauve is my least favorite color, she whispers, and then she takes my hands in hers and grips them, hard. She says, They're crazy, all of them, crazy crazy. You should be singing, Colleen. Sing now! Sing for me, Kalyna!

***

The *Theme from the Love Boat* has been playing in my head for three days, ever since Salina came up with the idea that I get a job as an entertainer on a cruise ship. From time to time, I try to sing along out loud, but it sounds more like a mantra than a song, as

I've forgotten all of the lines except one. *Love, exciting and new. Love, exciting and new.*

Five mornings in a row, Salina comes by with a new plan. The cruise ship is just the first. She's made it her job to find me a job and runs her morning visits like board meetings: lets herself in, drops into the beanbag chair, asks if the coffee's ready. No Good morning, no How are you. Strictly business. Out of her knapsack, she pulls her daily planner, the little black book in which she keeps detailed notes of all the employment information she gathers. One whole section of the book is devoted to me--"EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLEEN."

The coffee is never ready. I make a point of not making it before she arrives so that I have something to do while she reads from her daily planner. So that I don't look completely idle and helpless.

After the cruise ship, it's secretarial work. Salina knows of an employment agency--*Pinstripe*--that specializes in secretarial work. Her friend Beth started temping with *Pinstripe* three years ago and now she makes eight dollars an hour working full-time downtown. I tell Salina that I'm worth more than eight dollars an hour but thanks anyway.

The truth is, I can't type.

I can't type. I don't know the first thing about computers--we only had typewriters in Swaziland--and I've never waitressed. No sales experience. I've never touched a cash register or bagged groceries. For a while in high school I was a certified First-Aider, though I suspect the certificate has expired by now. My French is weak.

Technically, I don't even have a high school diploma, not a Canadian one, at least. For three summers, I taught music at Kiev's-K-Hi Summer Camp at Moose Lake, but there is no way to tell Salina this, to admit that the only thing I'm qualified to do is sing around a campfire. I know two hundred Ukrainian folk songs. It's embarrassing.

Salina's heard that there's an opening at a dormitory cafeteria on campus, dish-washing--opportunity for advancement to basic food preparation and then, who knows? The sky is the limit! It pays minimum wage plus free hairnets for all new employees.

A new esthetician in Eaton's Centre has placed a "Help Wanted--Inquire Within" sign in her window. It's worth a try, says Salina, stop by, give her a call.

Great, I say, sure. What is an esthetician? I wonder.

Salina brings me computer printouts from the Unemployment Office. She rips posters from light poles--posters advertising forty-five-dollar-an-hour jobs, no experience necessary, work from home, the easiest work you've ever done. She buys me the *Toronto Star*, for the Classifieds.

Get me a handwritten copy of your résumé, she says, and I'll jazz it up on my computer, make a hundred copies--laser copies, on fancy paper--and we can spend Saturday handing them out. We'll make a day of it. Shop a little, go for coffee. You've got to pay the bills, says Salina. Supermarket cashier, waitress, receptionist. Whatever it takes to pay the bills. Once the bills have been paid, you can devote all of your mental and emotional energy to your music career.

She is starting to remind me of my mother. I feel like her child.

I smile and say goodbye to Salina at the door--*Ciao*, have a great day, thanks again for stopping by. I wait a few minutes, until I'm sure that she's gone, and then I slam the door as hard as I can. I crumple up the printouts and the posters and throw them all away. I drain the remainder of the coffee from the pot and wash her cup. My goal is to remove all traces of her when she leaves. She can't fool me, I won't be duped. Her niceness is a front, a cover. She doesn't care about my bills, my music career, none of that. This is about Barry. To get me a job is to get me away from Barry. The more menial the better, so that I look stupid in his eyes. Well. I'm not stupid.

And the words to the *Love Boat* aren't lost, I'm sure of it. Just a matter of recovering them, of resurrecting *Love Boat* memories--*Captain Stubing, Gopher, The Promenade Deck*--until the theme song comes back in one piece, whole and intact. *The black bartender; Doc; the Mexican with the enormous tits. Love, exciting and new.*

What I should do is ask Barry. Just pick up the phone, dial his number, and ask him straight out if he can recite the words to the *Love Boat*. It's the kind of quirky question he'd love.

And if Barry wonders what has prompted me to pose such a question? He'll assume, naturally, that I have fallen in love and he'll deduce, moreover, that I'm in love with him, since he's the only man I've met in Toronto. I can't call him. I'm not prepared to disclose my feelings to him. Not yet, not now. Not until I've settled into my apartment, put up curtains, ascertained the status of his relationship with Salina. The timing must be right.

Slouched into the beanbag chair--thinking *Isaac, Puerto Vallarta*--I let the instrumental version of the *Love Boat* go. A slow, violin-and-cello variation of the theme song. I imagine that I'm not in my one-room apartment with its rust-orange shag carpet and light green wallpaper. Instead, I'm leaning against the railing of a ship, cheeks caressed by the gentle ocean spray and salt sea air. I am in a short terra-cotta sundress with spaghetti straps that criss-cross on my back; I wear gold sandals and a delicate gold anklet against my bronzed skin. Barry appears, five or six steps to my right, and he, too, leans against the railing of the ship, his billowy white shirt billowing in the breeze. His feet are bare, his loose white trousers rolled above the ankle.

Shortly, he will slip his arms under mine and around my back, half-holding me up and half-holding me down. I will open my eyes and there will be no words exchanged, only knowing glances, as we stroll back to his cabin. There, he will slowly undress me, slipping the straps gingerly off my shoulders.

I'll cry out, Barry! I can't! Not here, not now! What about Salina?

Barry will answer me with silence. In one bold, firm, aggressive--almost violent--movement he will bring my mouth to his, pressing me hard against him, making Salina a faded, faraway, forgotten memory.

***

Just prior to the summer of grade eight going into grade nine, the rumors are confirmed. My mother isn't losing her job, she's going to start teaching third grade, and she's more relieved than anything to be finished teaching Ukrainian. Wes doesn't care much--he's going into grade five; he's only been in Ukrainian for one year, so he'll only have one year of French to catch up on. It doesn't at all affect Sophie, who is going into grade eleven and who has completed her second language requirements. I, however, am devastated. I have to join the French students who have been taking French for five years. Carla Senko, Michael Holowaychuk, Peter Eliuk, all of them. I will be lost.

I write one letter to the principal, one to the school board, and one to the *St. Paul Journal*, protesting this forced migration into the French classroom. There are four of us in total who are being persecuted, but the other three victims don't seem to mind. Or, more likely, they're too afraid to say anything. They can't possibly believe the things that they say--that we need French to get a good job; that French is easier anyway; that there are no Ukrainian classes in high school and we'll all have to switch sooner or later. I tell them not to include *me* in their *we*. I am going to fight to take Ukrainian by correspondence, first in grade nine and then in high school. I tell them that they are traitors: traitors, double-crossers, and turncoats. They're selling us out, selling us right down the river. Kirsten Paulichuk asks me, What's a turncoat?

The week after the *St. Paul Journal* prints my letter to the editor, a reply comes from a resident who wishes to remain anonymous. Anonymous--in a very long letter, filled with errors--accuses me of anti-francophone racism, discrimination, and prejudice. My name is spelled Colleen "Luzack," Ukrainian is spelled "Ukrianian"; there are incomplete sentences and grammatical mistakes. I snort to my parents that anything goes in the *St. Paul Journal*.

Bad news comes back from the principal and the school board--two copies of the same letter arrive in separate envelopes with a different signature at the bottom of each copy.

> We regret to inform you that your request to take grade nine Ukrainian by correspondence has been denied. Please consider entering Miss Maximchuk's French program. Alternatively, we are pleased to offer you any one of the following options, designed specifically for our Young Ladies in the junior high school:
>
> 1. Introductory Typing
> 2. Introductory Food Preparation
> 3. Introductory Beauty Culture

It's hard to imagine what would be worse: sitting, ignorant and confused and mute, in a classroom with students who have taken French for five years, who are practically fluent, or sitting through a course for *Young Ladies*.

Mrs. Heatherington plays records during her typing classes--old country and western 45's of Merle Haggard, Johnny Cash, Mel Tellis, Conway Twitty--and her students type their exercises in time with the music. She doesn't care what they type--most of the girls, I've heard, write steamy sex scenes to exchange with one another after class--so long as their fingers never stop and they keep to the beat. Food Prep is like Home Economics without the sewing. I'm not sure what they learn in Beauty Culture. How to cut hair, I suppose, and give perms, and maybe how to wax facial hair.

Anyway it's just one year, says Sophie, one year and then you can return to Ukrainian by correspondence in high school. It won't be so bad. She says, Think how lucky you are to have had Ukrainian for five whole years in school. You should be thankful. Poor Wes had only one. And think about all of the kids in St. Paul who aren't

French or Ukrainian or Cree and who never even had one year, not one single year, not one single class, in their languages. Now that isn't fair, is it? Yet we don't hear a peep from all of the Norwegian kids, the Germans, the Polish kids, the Italians.

For the first time in my life, I tell Sophie to shut up. Just shut up! Easy for you to talk, all high and mighty in grade eleven. *You* were never oppressed, *your* language was never taken from you. I storm into the bedroom, slam the door. I yell, And there *are* no Italians in this fucking town.

Miss Maximchuk gives French textbooks to the four of us who are being forced to convert to French. The textbooks are from the earlier grades. We are supposed to use them over the summer to catch up on the last five years. For every grade, there's a text, a reader, and a workbook, plus cassettes to go along with the stories and questions. In Ukrainian, we never had such things. My mother photocopied her hand-made booklets and exercises; *pysanka* patterns, bingo cards, and Ukrainian alphabet flash cards. The pages of the French books are glossy, like the pages of a magazine; there are pictures of Quebec, crossword puzzles, fold-out board games, French hangman. On the French cassettes, the songs are modern--complete with synthesizers, rock and roll drummers, and electric guitar--not like the scratchy old recordings of polka bands Mom played for her classes. Ron Lakusta and the Hi-Lites Band, Ernie Zaozirny. Bill Boychuk and His Easy Aces. All that time--all those years in the Ukrainian classroom--I was being persecuted. And I didn't even know it.

For the first month of the summer holiday, I work on my French every day, from morning until supper. By the end of July, I have come to the end of Grade Four French.

Wes laughs at me; he says that I should watch *Sesame Street*, I would learn the same things. So far, I can conjugate the verbs *avoir* and *être*. I know the rules of the *er*, *ir*, and *re* verbs, plus some vocabulary, numbers. I haven't done any regular summer things--there has been no time. No time for bike riding, going to the swimming pool. Hanging out at the arcade, drinking Slurpees.

Then I stop. One day, out of the blue. I take the French books out to the silver garbage pails behind the house, beyond the backyard, and, one by one, I rip every page out of every book, grades four to eight, all of them. I watch the glossy pages fall--pictures of the Quebec flag, a Quebec Nordiques player, a Montreal market framed by a bright blue Quebec sky--right left, right left right, and down. No sound. One after the other, hundreds of pages and words. Plus cassettes. I yank the thin tape out of each plastic cassette until the bottom of the garbage pail is a bed of thin brown ringlets. It's vandalism--sabotage, even--for none of these materials belongs to me. The books belong to Miss Maximchuk, or the school, or maybe the school board.

If Mom and Dad ask me what I've done with my French books--why I'm not carrying them around anymore and why I'm not reciting *je suis tu es il est nous sommes* at the supper table--I will tell them that the reflexive verbs did it. Reflexive verbs, actions taken by the subject upon itself. There is--was--an example in the Grade Four book, near the end. A photo of a Quebec license plate, white with royal blue writing. *Je me souviens*, it said. *I remember*.

Except that I can't remember. The words that I've learned in Ukrainian class--the phrases, the sentences--they're all slipping away. I'm forgetting everything. Do we have reflexive verbs in Ukrainian? How do we say "I remember"? I must have known once. I don't know anymore. One by one, all of the Ukrainian words I once remembered are being replaced by French.

So I drop a match into the garbage pail and I wait for the paper to start burning. I drop another, and another, until the fire finally takes. I blow on it a little, to make sure, before I walk away. I imagine that I'm in my mother's classroom again and I'm hearing my mother's voice. She is asking me, as she has always asked her students at the beginning of every Ukrainian class, *Sohodni iaka pohoda?* What is it like outside? And I am answering.

Mamo, it's a beautiful day.

***

Friday night in Toronto and I'm washing clothes. It's the first chance I have to use the basement washing machine and the dryer, appliances shared by all of the tenants in this house. I do whites first, including towels and underwear--all of my underwear, bras, panties, the works. So that, in fact, as I am walking up and down the stairs--leaving a little trail of laundry detergent--I wear nothing underneath my shorts and my T-shirt. I feel nude, I feel dangerous. I feel alive. I feel that I can single-handedly take on the city. Lutzak versus the City of Toronto.

The hallway outside my room is very dark. To find the keyhole, I've got to look right up close, and my nose is almost touching the doorknob before I am successful. While I'm in the process of inserting the key into the lock of my door, having just deposited my whites in the washing machine, the phone rings. Barry has set the ringer at such an outrageous volume that I get scared and jump, knocking my nose against the door. On the nose-ring side. I slip my finger into my nostril--blood, though not much of it. No need to panic.

I take the call--it's Barry, in fact--and then, moments later, a second call, this time from Salina. Their news is the same. They and all of their friends are going to see a local band play at a place called Lee's Palace and would I consider coming along so that they can introduce me? Barry says, Hop on the TTC, it'll be your first solo subway ride; Salina says, Not on your life, girl, be ready in forty-five. I'm picking you up.

There is no time to tend to my nose. I stuff a piece of toilet paper into the nostril that is bleeding and pull my hair out of its ponytail. I strip frantically, leaving shorts and T-shirt wherever they fall, running to the bathroom, jamming a toothbrush into and around my mouth. In the shower, with twenty-five minutes left, I plan what I will wear. It is an important night, symbolically speaking; it will lay the foundation for my new social life in my new city. I can't be late. My clothes can be neither wrinkled nor pressed. My perfume can't be too overbearing or too subtle. I've got to look good, but I can't look like I tried.

My hair is shampooed, rinsed, and conditioned, and I am standing in the centre of my bathroom, dripping wet and shivering, before I realize that I have no towel with which to dry myself. Not only no towel but no bra, no undergarments. No time to panic, either. I shake myself the best that I can, like a dog, and pat-pat my arms and legs with my shorts and T-shirt. When the phone rings again, I have fifteen minutes, and it's my mother.

She says, Hell-o Kalyna, it's your moth-er calling, her voice rising and falling the way it rises and falls when she is settling in for a long talk. Sunday afternoons for two years in Swaziland--five p.m. sharp my time, nine a.m. sharp her time--I heard the same rise and fall of her voice through the receiver of the telephone in the girls' dorm. No other mothers called as frequently or as predictably--not even the mothers who lived nearby, in Johannesburg or Maputo--and no other mother called just to describe in detail the Sunday dinner she was about to prepare.

I'm defrosting a thirty-pound turkey, my mother says, just for the heck of it. Sophie and Wes are coming home for the weekend, and I'm making a turkey dinner to celebrate. *Nelesneky, holubtsi, pyrizhky.* What the heck. My children are worth it. Cranberry sauce from scratch. If their mother should crack up completely one day, I want them to remember she made cranberry sauce from scratch.

Mom laughs, as though what she has just said is a joke. When I left home to live in Swaziland, my mother nearly had a nervous breakdown.

Ten minutes and counting.

The thing that I shouldn't do is tell my mother I'm too busy to talk. She'll ask, Too busy doing what? I'll say, Getting ready to go out. She'll pause. Oh, she'll say. Oh. All right. OK. Well. I'll try again, maybe. Maybe when you're not so busy that you can't talk to the only mother you have in the world.

The thing that I should do is ask her about her week--How is her new batch of grade threes? Are the cucumbers still producing? Has there been any frost yet?--and I should ask about the rest of the family--Has Dad made any decisions about retirement? Is

Wes enjoying university? What is Sophie saying about law school?--and I should say that everything is fine here, I've got a little room, very plain, a little run-down, but I'm adjusting slowly, you know, doing what I can to fight the homesickness. I should lie and tell my mother that she has been right all along, that I fully regret moving to Toronto. That I've been nothing but lonely since I arrived. That I'm trying to make the most of it nonetheless.

Eight-and-a-half minutes to go before Salina arrives, and Mom has already told me about one death and two cancers--Betty Sawchenko, Claude Lafrance, and Uncle Harry, respectively.

With seven minutes remaining, I am in a state of genuine panic and words start to spill from my mouth. First, an apology--Mom, I'm really sorry, I can't believe I've lost track of time like this, where's my head, but I've got to get going--then, the explanation. A spontaneous, improvisational performance. Unplanned, unpremeditated--unbelievable, really, except that she seems to buy my story. I say that I've got a gig. It's the most natural place to start lying, since I came to Toronto, after all, for my music career.

I've got a gig, I say--a place at Yonge and Bloor.

Giving her a real intersection makes it sound credible.

A place called Lee's Palace, I say.

I don't really know the address of Lee's Palace yet. I'm starting to think that I never will.

My mother is thrilled. Go, go, she says. Go!

There is no time, once I've hung up the phone, to feel any guilt about what I have done. There is hardly time enough to blow-dry my hair and to dress, *sans* bra and panties. Salina knocks just as I've finished blotting my lipstick on a square of toilet paper.

We're all going to meet at the Future Bakery, says Salina, if that's all right with you. Then we're going to play pool at this little dive by Lee's. As I start to lace up my boots, she says, You and I can be partners, if you want.

Warning bells go off inside my head. I'm not sure that this is what I want. What if I want to be partners with Barry? I see what's going on, I can read between the lines, I catch her meaning. Salina is trying to keep me away from him. Again. I've almost had it. I tell her in the nicest possible way that we should leave these details to the pool-place. After all, I say, Barry might want to be your partner. Or he might want to be *mine*.

Salina shrugs and turns and walks out.

***

I'm finally at the top. It's been five months--six if you count the month in the summer--and the best part is that I've done it without the books. Though I've paid for Miss Maximchuk to buy new materials, and though I've apologized and promised to never again destroy school materials, I'm not permitted to take anything home--readers, textbooks, *cahiers*, nothing.

It is, I believe, a bigger conspiracy than I originally imagined. The world, I've learned, is against me. Colleen Lutzak versus the World. My parents are in on it, having called my campaign nonsense and having forced me to give Miss Maximchuk a written apology and having made me sit in her classroom four hours a week. Although I wrote several letters to him, the Minister of Education expressed no interest in my case, nor did the Premier. I was sure that when the *Edmonton Journal* published my letter the whole ugly truth of it would come out--Blatant Discrimination in St. Paul Junior High School, Devastated Youth Commits Arson to Make Voice Heard, Politicians Turn Blind Eye to Social Wrong. I thought, too, that official invitations would follow, invitations to Ukrainian bilingual schools in Edmonton or Calgary or both. But the *Edmonton Journal* didn't publish my letter.

Learning French, in fact, isn't difficult. Not nearly as difficult as Ukrainian. There's no new alphabet to learn, and half the words in French are exactly like English words. When I talk in French or write in French, I mostly use long English words--words that end in "ance" and "tude." After almost six months, I can hardly believe that Miss Maximchuk hasn't caught on. I've used *insouciance*, *délivrance*, and *solitude* in every French composition I've written. Fifteen compositions, fifteen *insouciances*, *délivrances*, and *solitudes*, for a grand total of forty-five red circles--Miss Maximchuk circles each of my big words in red pen and writes, *Ton vocabulaire est bon!* in the margin.

The name-calling, even, doesn't bother me so much. When I walk into Miss Maximchuk's room at the beginning of class, I fold my hands on my lap, waiting for it to start. Sometimes it's Firestarter. Sparky. Smoky. Hot Stuff. They all join in. I know what to expect.

What's hardest, I think, is the feeling that I have carried with me since I started Miss Maximchuk's class. The feeling that I am floating and bobbing in a pool of water and that pieces of me are floating and bobbing away. When I lie in bed at night, I make mental lists of the new French words I've learned and I try to match each French word with its Ukrainian equivalent. To keep my Ukrainian memory fresh and strong. I even put my Ukrainian-English dictionary beside my bed. At first, the exercise is easy. *Je--ia. Pomme--iabluko.* Numbers, the days of the week. *Grenouille--zhaba.* But we go through chapters quickly in French class--thirty new nouns per day, five new verbs--and I can't find words like insouciance, deliverance, and solitude in the Ukrainian-English dictionary. I am losing words now, daily.

So when I select my topic for the French final project, it is a matter of survival, of life and death. The ninth grade French projects--*Les Thèmes et Les Variations*--are infamous in our school; they are Miss Maximchuk's *raison d'être*. Each year, she chooses a *thème*--this year's is *Canada, Le Pays Multiculturel*--then she asks her senior French students to pair up and work on *variations* of the *thème*. The presentation of *Les Thèmes et Les Variations* in June is a gala event--like the school Christmas concert--with parents, teachers, and school board members in attendance.

Peter Eliuk and Greg Pederson are doing Mexican-Canadians. There is talk that they'll make real *papier mâché piñatas*. Sarah H. and Sarah M. decide on Italian-Canadians, and they're bringing *tortellini* for the audience to sample. Torn between the Scots and the Irish in Canada, Laurie-Anne and Jessie compromise--the British in Canada. Carla Senko and Michael Holowaychuk--they're a couple now, boyfriend and girlfriend--pick the Cree.

I plan to work alone--*sans* partner, independently. Solo. I won't even ask Miss Maximchuk for assistance. My project will be mine, mine, mine. I'll make maps, models, diagrams, and charts. I might even bring in my guitar and sing, or get Sophie to come in costume and dance. The title of my project will be *Je Me Souviens Aussi: Les Ukrainiens au Canada.*. My *coup de grace.*

In four months, I make six six-feet-by-four-feet maps--two of Canada, two of Alberta, two of the rough triangular area between Vegreville, Smoky Lake, and St. Paul--which show the changes in the demographic distribution of Ukrainian settlers in Canada between 1900 and 1980. Plus Ukraine, of course. I also make a six-feet-by-four-feet map of Ukraine which shows the cities and the villages--the rivers, too--from which all the Ukrainian settlers originally came. My written report is forty-seven pages long; in it, I describe the path my family followed to Alberta. From Bukovyna to Frankfurt by train, to Halifax by boat, to Winnipeg again by train--by CPR--and, finally, to Szypenitz on foot. I include recipes and real embroidery patterns. Some discussion of Ukrainian folk music and religion. Photos of Ukrainian dance costumes.

For the presentation itself, I intend to sing *Tsyhanochka* with my guitar, and to bring a bowl full of *pysanky*. I will need a table for my *pysanky* and also for my 3-D miniature replica of a traditional Ukrainian village, with its miniature corrals around its miniature chickens and pigs, its thatched-roofed and white-washed miniature house. Around me, I will hang the maps and a poster on which I have printed an excerpt of the Andrew Suknaski poem "What Is Remembered"--translated into French, of course.

I translate almost everything into French, except the names of people, like Clifford Sifton, Ivan Pylypow, Wasyl Eleniak. And Andrew Suknaski. Also the names of Ukrainian dishes I can't bring myself to translate. *Les petites crêpes au fromage* doesn't work--*nelesneky* are *nelesneky*. *Pysanky*, too, remain *pysanky*, not *les oeufs de Pâques* or *les oeufs colorés*. For each Ukrainian word, I write two transcriptions, one in the Roman alphabet and one in the Cyrillic. *Pysanky*, писанки.

The night before *Les Thèmes et Les Variations*, the telephone rings, and my mother talks quietly into the receiver for a long time before she passes the phone to me. I'm in the bathroom, putting the finishing touches on the three new *pysanky* I've made for my presentation. They've already been varnished. Now, one at a time, I hold the eggs over the sink and poke two small holes in each one. When I blow into one hole, my breath pushes the egg-yolk and egg-white through the other hole, until the insides of the three eggs are one yellow clot slipping down the drain. Mom yells, Collee-een, pho-one, it's Miss Maximchuk.

Miss Maximchuk is on the phone. Miss Maximchuk, whose books and cassettes I once burned; who still searches my bag as I leave her classroom and who still forbids me--despite my nine-and-a-half months of diligence and propriety--to take a textbook home. Miss Maximchuk, who tells my mother, in the staff room at recess or lunchtime, that she has a recurring nightmare of her classroom burning and her textbooks burning. Miss Maximchuk, who reminds my mother that she may never recover from the near-fatal professional and personal wounds inflicted upon her by me last summer. Miss Maximchuk is on the phone and she wants to talk to me.

Carla Senko is in a bind, says Miss Maximchuk. Earlier this evening, Carla caught Michael Holowaychuk behind the 7-Eleven with a girl from the École. You can imagine that Carla is very distressed--she's been having tea here with me for the last three or four hours. This was totally unexpected, completely unforeseen. Carla's heart is positively broken. She feels, well, humiliated, frankly, and vulnerable. Right now she needs our encouragement and our support.

Help, too, don't forget help!--I can hear Carla's voice in the background.

Across the room, I see my mother shaking her head.

Yes, and our help, says Miss Maximchuk, I think that Carla needs our help most of all. We girls need to stick together!

While the voice of Miss Maximchuk chirps through the phone line, I see Carla Senko, nine years old, pulling a cinnamon bun apart with her hands. It's the biggest cinnamon bun I've ever seen--bigger than both her hands put together--and when she unrolls it, raisins drop out and onto her desk. I have six poppyseed *pompushky* in my lunch. I offer to trade all six for her cinnamon bun. I will trade anything for a taste of her cinnamon bun. She takes my *pompushky* and gives me half of the cinnamon bun. Later, toward the end of the day, as I'm tossing away some pencil shavings, I see my *pompushky* squashed at the bottom of the garbage pail.

I see Carla Senko when she is eleven years old, in her gym clothes. Both she and I have been selected as the team captains in Mrs. Zalinsky's gym class. It is the end of volleyball season and we are having a mock championship. Each team captain must come up with a team name. Carla takes the *Panthers*, the Panther being our school mascot. Most of the people she chooses for her team are members of the Junior High Volleyball team, so they have matching *Panther* uniforms; their team cheer is the *Panthers* roar. All in all, I don't think it's very original. I call my team the Volleyball Vultures, capitalizing on the alliteration of the V's. It's a fresh name, an innovative name. It says what we are about as a team: winning. More than winning, devouring. More than devouring even, our name, I think, declares that our opponents are dead and defeated before we even start--we are simply cleaning up the scraps.

I see Carla leading her teammates in the teasing of my team. Some of the *Panthers* caw like crows, others gobble like turkeys--none makes the sound of a real vulture, whatever that sound may be--but the effect is the same. All my teammates mutiny halfway through the mock championship. All except Joe Jr., the only kid in our class from the reservation, who walks off the court to speak with Mrs. Zalinsky. After a few minutes, I hear Joe Jr. saying, What're you teaching in this class anyways, fucken help her out already. I think he means me, help *me* out. But Joe Jr. gets himself kicked out of class for using bad language and Carla tells everyone that he's my boyfriend--that I've gone Indian, and that we're going to have half-breed babies. She says we should rename our team the *Redskins.*

I see Carla Senko at six, at seven, at eight years of age--I see her at twelve and thirteen. I see her telling boys that I stuff my bra with Kleenex, that I suck my brother's cock, that I have herpes--mean and cruel things, horrible things that aren't true. I see Carla, in the second row of the school auditorium, laughing while I play the guitar and sing in the talent show. I see her glare when I accept the award for highest average in grade six, grade seven, grade eight. I see her lips peel back and her jaw snap--spitting and hissing my new names, Devil's Child, Bohunk, Nishtow-Lover. But I can't see Carla in a bind, distressed, broken-hearted. If I could, I think that I would watch and smile.

This way, says Miss Maximchuk, Carla can still be actively involved in the presentation of *Les Thèmes et Les Variations*. Of course, she won't be graded on the work you've put into your project. It's just that--well. She can't bear to stand beside Michael, you see. It would be too much for her, you understand. It's just for the presentation, just for the evening, so that she doesn't feel left out. I'm sure you see where she's coming from. You don't have a partner anyway. Michael will present the Cree by himself. Carla will present the Ukrainians with you. You know, Carla is Ukrainian too. Maybe you could lend her one of your costumes for the presentation. What a pair you'll be! It's decided then. Carla will present the Ukrainians with you.

Carla will present the Ukrainians with me.

One hour to showtime, the night of *Les Thèmes et Les Variations*, and I am dressed in Sophie's full *Poltovsky* costume, headpiece and boots included. Sophie has French-braided my hair and slicked back the bangs from my forehead with gel, as she would if this were a dance performance. I've rouged my cheeks, brushed blue on my eyelids, painted my lips dark red. Backstage in the school auditorium, I double-check that my maps and posters are firmly tacked to the display boards, and that Sophie's skirt won't drop off my waist midway through the presentation. Sophie's costume is much too big for me. But I can't wear my own. I can't wear my own *Poltovsky* costume, made just for me, because I've lent it to Carla--for the sake of the presentation, so that we'll match. Carla in burgundy, me in green. I've lent it because it would look silly if I wore a costume and Carla wore a regular dress. I've lent it because Miss Maximchuk asked me to lend it, and because I couldn't say no.

Under the guidance of Miss Maximchuk--who has made a full-time job of consoling the lovelorn Carla, as though Carla is her friend and not her student--Carla and I have rehearsed our parts for the presentation. I've shown Carla how to put on the costume. The order of the garments. Slip, skirt--open V to the front--then apron; bra, undershirt, blouse, vest. How to tie the *poias*, the sash; how many times to loop the beaded necklace. Where the headpiece sits on the head. The best way to keep hair off the forehead and under the headpiece.

At the last minute, Carla tells Miss Maximchuk and me that she doesn't want to wear the velvet vest, it makes her look fat. She takes off the vest and gives it to Miss Maximchuk, who folds it into a square and stuffs it into her purse.

Carla says that she would prefer a different blouse. The blouse I've given her has sleeves that are too puffy. I tell Carla that she's just a little nervous. You look great, I say, that's how the sleeves are supposed to look. I try to be cheerful.

What do you know? says Carla. Michael is going to be in the audience. *You* can afford to look all bloated and fat, but I *can't*. Plus this headpiece is retarded, she says. I'm not wearing it, it makes me look like I've got horns growing out of my head, forget it.

Carla pulls off the headpiece, pulls her bangs out from under the hair-net, and starts to take apart her French braids. I've rarely seen anybody wear the *Poltovsky* costume without a headpiece and it's unheard of to step into the costume with loose hair. Carla looks half-nude to me, and cheap.

Miss Maximchuk takes the headpiece from Carla and tosses it onto the floor. I pick it up, brush it off and tell Miss Maximchuk that this headpiece cost almost two hundred dollars. She ignores me.

Let's pin the sleeves down, says Miss Maximchuk, so that they look more tapered.

The sleeves of *Poltovsky* blouses, I say, aren't supposed to be tapered, they're supposed to be billowy. The billowier the better.

From her purse--as though she doesn't hear me--Miss Maximchuk pulls a pincushion, turns her back to me, and starts pinning Carla's sleeves. My sleeves, actually. She starts pinning *my* sleeves because it is, in fact, *my* blouse.

I want to rip the costume off Carla's body--leave her stark naked backstage. Miss Maximchuk would intervene, of course, so I'd have to knock her out first. I suppose I could choke her with the ribbons of the headpiece Carla refuses to wear--just enough to make her faint. With Miss Maximchuk out of the way, I'd stuff a *pysanka* in Carla's mouth to stop her from crying out. I'd hear the sweet sound of Carla crunching the egg shell and gagging and spitting. I'd bring my knee down on her chest. With one arm, I'd pin her hands down; with the other, I'd untie the apron and the skirt, and I'd rip down the slip. I'd yank the beads from her neck, sending them rolling above her head. There would be pins still in her sleeves and she'd try to yelp because the pins would poke her as I pulled the blouse over her head. She'd wish she had listened to me and worn an undershirt. Poor stupid Carla, no undershirt. Lying naked for all the world to see. She'd sob but I wouldn't care. I'd slap her face. Shut up, Carla! I'd say. Then I'd slap her face again.

Carla walks on stage first--no velvet vest, no head piece, sleeves pinned tightly around her arms. I can't follow her. I can't stand next to her on stage. I can't move. There is a lump in my throat and I'm afraid that if I open my mouth I'll cry.

Miss Maximchuk tells me to get going. She says, Let's go, Colleen! You're on!

I shake my head. I'm not going, I say.

You *have* to go, says Miss Maximchuk, pushing me hard toward the stage.

I won't budge.

What's wrong with you? says Miss Maximchuk. Your final grade depends on this presentation, Colleen. There are three hundred people out there waiting for you.

Carla runs offstage. Do something! she says to Miss Maximchuk.

You do something, Carla, says Miss Maximchuk. Get back out there and do the presentation alone, by yourself. Colleen has stage fright.

I don't want to, says Carla.

You *have* to, says Miss Maximchuk.

I can't.

You must.

While Carla and Miss Maximchuk argue, I slip onto the stage--I've never had stage fright in my life--and by the time they realize that I'm on stage, I've already delivered the introduction to the presentation. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the two of them behind the curtain, in the wings. Carla's arms are crossed, Miss Maximchuk is in a frenzy because she doesn't know what to do--she alternately hisses for me to get off the stage and for Carla to get on the stage But I know that Miss Maximchuk can't stop me, I know that Carla won't join me. I'm perfectly safe on stage. Perfectly content. I do the whole presentation--the whole performance--in perfectly broken Ukrainian.

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There are five of us crowded around a table-for-two at the Future Bakery--James and Salina, some Indian guy named Viraj, his best friend Tony, and me. We're waiting for Barry to arrive before we make our way over to the pool-place. He's an hour late. No one seems concerned about having to wait, except for me. What's keeping him? Maybe he's been in an accident. Maybe he's been mugged.

While I worry, James and Viraj take turns reciting lines from their favourite TV show, *Kids in the Hall*. Back and forth, Viraj and James chatter.

James says, Watch this! He pinches together his thumb and forefinger. I'm crushing your head! he says.

Viraj holds his thumb in the air. Nobody home! he says. Nobody home!

Salina laughs so hard that tears start streaming down her cheeks. She gets up--holding her sides--to grab a napkin from the next table; as she wipes her cheeks, James announces gruffly that he is the man with the cabbage head. Viraj bends his neck toward James in short, spastic pecks.

The Chicken Lady! says Salina, catching fresh tears with her napkin. I love it!

I try to laugh along, as though I'm in on the jokes. The truth is, I've only seen the *Kids in the Hall* once and it didn't seem at all funny to me. None of the *Kids in the Hall* are women. I prefer the *Royal Canadian Air Farce*--Luba Goy is Ukrainian. And she's a woman. I get her humor. As James declares with an exaggerated lisp that he's Buddy

Cole, I turn to Tony. At least I'm not the only one at the table who's not laughing. Tony hasn't cracked a smile since he got here.

You like the Air Farce? I ask Tony.

Nope, he says, taking a sip of his drink.

Oh, I say. Is that straight vodka? I ask.

Water, says Tony.

I was just kidding, I say, still trying to strike up a conversation. You know, because straight vodka seems like the kind of thing to drink here.

Tony looks at me like I'm from another planet.

All of these paintings, I say, pointing to the walls of the Future Bakery, and the vases over by the cash register, and that wooden ax across from the cappuccino machine. It's all Slavic folk art--Russian or Ukrainian or something. And the food, too. You know, they serve cabbage rolls and *borshch*.

Tony shrugs. Didn't notice, he says. I'm Italian.

I get up to go to the washroom. I'm blotting my lipstick in the washroom mirror when Salina swings open the door to the washroom. Her cheeks are smudged blue-black with mascara.

Shit, she says, wetting a piece of paper towel. Can you believe this? She rubs the paper towel across her face, smearing the mascara across it. Oh fuck it, she says, filling her hands with liquid soap, then scrubbing all the make-up off her face.

I try to look concerned. I say, Oh dear, and, Oh dammit. But I have to fight the urge to smile when she's finished--her face is washed-out and blotchy. It looks like she has no eyelashes. Barry is as good as mine.

What am I going to do? says Salina. I look like crap. I look like shit.

I offer Salina my lipstick--knowing full well that she can't wear brown.

Oh forget it, says Salina. I can't wear brown. What does it matter *anyway*, she says, I don't have a chance with the guy. He doesn't even know I exist.

The guy? My stomach turns. Salina has never before spoken *openly* about her feelings for Barry. Confrontation makes me nervous.

How do you know that? I ask. How do you *know* that you don't have a chance?

My heart beat accelerates. Maybe Barry has told her that he has feelings for another woman. Maybe the other woman is me.

Because, says Salina. Because I've known Viraj for, like, years. Since high school. Since *junior* high school. I've been in love with him for as long as I can remember. But he's always dating Indian chicks, you know? When will I get the hint. He's not interested in a honky like me. I just might as well forget him once and for all.

Viraj? Viraj. Viraj! It's *Viraj*, not Barry! I'm struck with the sudden urge to laugh--to sing! To tell Salina that it's *all right*, she's not alone. I'm *here*. The two of us can run home and re-make her face. Nothing to it. We'll do her up in browns if that's what it takes. No problem. The night isn't ruined--her chances aren't ruined.

Salina grabs me by the arm. Let's go, she says, before I *really* start crying. Brave girl. She puts her arm around my waist, I put my arm around her shoulder. Together we walk out of the washroom. Then Salina turns, suddenly. She grabs my hands in hers and says, Colleen, I'm such a jerk. Such an ignorant, self-centred *jerk*. I haven't even asked if you're OK here--you know, if you're comfortable with the guys. Are you? Are you OK? It looks like there are some sparks flying between you and Tony. Salina smiles.

I throw my head back and laugh, then I grab her hand--leading her back to the table while we talk. Tony? I say. No. Absolutely no sparks between Tony and me--none, zero, zip. It's Barry. I am completely and totally, one hundred per cent--no, one hundred and *ten* per cent--head-over-heels, in love, love, love, love, love with--

We stop. Several feet from the table, we stop. Salina tightens her grip on my hand.

Oh Colleen, she says. Oh God. I thought you--I thought it was--Oh God. She lets go of my hand, reaching her arm around my shoulders to hold me up. Barry has arrived--just arrived, by the looks of things. He's holding hands with James. James is kissing him full on the lips.

What do you want to do? says Salina. Do you want to go? We can go, right now. Straight out the door.

For a moment I think about leaving. Then I say, No. No. Vodka will do. I'll have a glass of vodka, no ice. Straight.

***

I meet him on the first of the Heritage Days at Hawrelak Park in Edmonton, after we--my dance group, Intermediate Mixed--make our debut performance on the main stage. His name is Corey and he is seventeen. He plays the *tsymbaly* and he lives in Winnipeg.

I'm in love.

During the first year of our separation, when Corey is back in Manitoba finishing high school, we can phone each other, write long letters. Record ourselves talking on cassettes and exchange them. What's a year? And with Corey moving to Edmonton after grade twelve--to study music at the University of Alberta--our second year apart won't even feel like real separation. Edmonton is two-and-a-half hours from St. Paul. What's two-and-a-half hours? By the time he's finished his first year of university, I'll be graduating from high school and joining him in the city, at university. We'll probably take the same classes and move into an apartment together--a plain little one-bedroom, with a bed, a table, a dresser, a bookshelf. We'll have candles, too, and old wine bottles for candelabras. Fresh flowers every day, and freshly baked bread, and Ukrainian music from morning until night.

In our bookshelf, we'll keep copies of *The Kobza-Player*, *Sons of the Soil*, *Men In Sheepskin Coats*. One wall we'll cover with a long Bukovynian tapestry--a *kylym*, dark green, rust and gold; underneath it, we'll place Corey's *tsymbaly* and beside the *tsymbaly*, a *bandura*, which he'll learn to play eventually. All along our windowsills, we'll put up framed reproductions of William Kurelek's paintings, from *The Prairie Boys' Winter*. Boys playing fox and geese, boys chasing after a chicken in the snow. Boys playing hockey on a frozen slough. And we'll hang gold Greek Orthodox icons of baby Jesuses and Virgin Mary's. For their artistic value only, of course.

No one knows about Corey yet--not Mom, Dad, Sophie, or Wes. Serves them right. Sophie's group and Wes's group weren't asked to dance at this year's Heritage Days, so Mom and Dad have taken them camping. They're camping. I'm dancing for the first time ever at Heritage Days, on the main stage, in my brand new--never-been-worn--*Podillian* costume, and they're *camping*. After they announced that they were going without me--without me, head fisherwoman--I locked myself in the bathroom and cried. Me, chief fish-catcher, -filleter, -smoker, -frier. I ignored Sophie when she knocked on the bathroom door and when she said sorry and when she promised not to have any fun at the lake without me. I gave them all the silent treatment.

That was before I fell in love. Now, I say, Let them camp. Let them camp extra-long and extra-hard, so that I can have more days with Corey at the festival. Let the fishing be good--better than it has been in years. Let the sun shine! Let them wake up on the North Side of Wolf Lake and fry fish to their hearts' content. Let them chop potatoes and onions, and gorge themselves on Saskatchewan Paiella. I hope they catch their limit of walleye, water-ski until they drop. I hope the lake is like glass and that they see pelicans and hear loon-calls. I hope that Mom and Dad get tipsy on Lemon Hart and lovey-dovey before bed. All the things I cared about once, I care about no longer. I'm a changed person, a new woman. A woman in love.

Here is how it happened.

Still wet under our blouses and out of breath from our parts in the *Podillian Polka*, Jennifer Demkiw and I decide to make a tour of the festival grounds in our *Podillian* costumes. Two-piece, fitted suits--bright white--embroidered with burgundy thread, plus matching burgundy boots--brand new--and satin pillbox hats. We could change into our street clothes and our street shoes, take down our hair and wipe the stage make-up from our faces. There is a tent designated as our dance club's dressing room, after all, and we have seven hours before our next show. But we've waited so long for these costumes--six-and-a-half months--and made so many trips with our mothers to Calgary--five-and-a-half hours one way--for measurements, fittings, pinnings, and alterations. Now that we have our new costumes, at last, we don't want to take them off. We want to show them off.

No dancers in our dance club have ever worn *Podillian* costumes or performed a dance from the region of *Podillia*. According to our instructor, Kevin, no Ukrainian dance club in the country has ever gone the way of *Podillia*. *Poltava* is the norm. At Ukrainian festivals in Vegreville or Hafford, *Poltava* is everywhere. Girls in velvet vests, boys in baggy pants. Spins, acrobatics, it's *passé*. On occasion, we've seen a Transcarpathian dance, the odd group in *Lemko* costume. For a while, *Hutsul* was in vogue--leather moccasins instead of boots, personalized sheepskin vests. Boys performed *Hutsul* dances with wooden axes. One year in Veg, an all-male group from Canmore danced the *Hutsul Arkan* around a fake fire--charred logs, orange crepe paper, Christmas tree bulbs--to replicate the ambiance of the Carpathian mountains. Then the *Hutsul* trend really caught on, and the *Hutsul* costumes of dancers from every dance club started to look the same because all of the mothers took the same *Hutsul*-vest making seminar in Saskatoon. I know. My mother made three.

We are sharing a falafel, Jennifer and I, and walking. I'm wondering what goes into a falafel, and Jennifer is wondering why anyone, given a choice, would possibly choose to watch anything but Ukrainian dancing. Nothing compares to Ukrainian dancing, she says. The inside of my falafel is dark red. Nothing takes as much skill, as much precision as Ukrainian dancing, says Jennifer. Purple cabbage, I think. Nothing is livelier or more colorful, she says, than Ukrainian dancing. Spanish onions, or maybe beets.

For a few minutes, we stop to watch a girl in a kilt hopping over two criss-crossed swords on the floor of the Scotland stage. Her music is coming from a live bagpipe player, the first I've ever seen. It gives me shivers. I nudge Jennifer with my elbow and mouth the word, *Wow;* she rolls her eyes and pulls me away. One more note from that bagpipe and I think I'll scream, says Jennifer, it sounds like a rutting moose. As though she knows the sound of a rutting moose. She says, What a waste of two perfectly good swords, and then--raising her voice for the benefit of the people around us--she adds that our Senior Boys will be performing a *real* sword dance, a *Ukrainian* sword dance, with fencing maneuvers and stage combat on the main stage at two o'clock.

I can feel my face burning--the people around us could be Scottish for all we know--and so I walk in the direction of the Greek dancers, hoping Jennifer will follow. There are more than a dozen men on stage shouting and shuffling in a semi-circle with their arms draped on each other's shoulders. They're all smiling and full of energy. I start clapping along with their music, and smiling along with them. Just look at that, I say, you can see in their faces how much they love dancing. Jennifer says, tell me, Colleen--tell me how *that* is dancing. There's nothing there. No skill. No choreography, no footwork, no practice. Nothing. I could out-dance them without even trying, she says.

In the corner of the stage beside us are three Indian men sitting cross-legged on a mat; one taps on some little bongos, and the other two pluck and strum odd-shaped stringed instruments--Indian guitars, I suppose. As they play, a barefooted Indian girl in a bright green sari starts to move--ankle bracelets jingling, arm bracelets jingling; gold on her hands, around her neck, hanging from her ears. For several minutes, Jennifer and I watch and say nothing. I'm stunned. I've never seen a dancer like her, one who dances with her whole body, with her eyes and her eyebrows, her fingers, her wrists. Under her breath Jennifer says, Well, is she just going to wiggle and jiggle on same spot all day? I look down at my feet, notice a scuff in my new boots. Jennifer says, Well, I don't know about you, but this chick is putting me to sleep. I pretend that I haven't heard Jennifer. I take a Kleenex from my purse, wet it with spit, and rub it on the toe of my right boot to get rid of the scuff.

Jennifer says walking around with me is becoming a real drag. She's going back to the dressing-room tent to listen to her Walkman and to hang out with the other girls. We part ways beside the stage of the girl in the bright green sari. I watch the girl in the bright green sari, I clap--hard--when she's finished. Then I head over to the Indian teepee for a piece of buttered bannock and a cup of tea.

Three steps from the teepee, between the Jamaican Patty Kiosk and the East African Marimba Band, I'm knocked over. By a guy in black Wrangler jeans and a white shirt with red and black embroidery around the collar and the cuffs. Ukrainian, for sure. A blond guy, running full tilt into me, with dulcimer hammers in his hands.

Fuck! says the guy in the black jeans and the embroidered shirt, as he helps me up. I think that he's noticed the grass stains on the back of my bright white *Podillian* skirt, and he feels bad, since he is the reason that my skirt is ruined. He looks very good in his Wranglers, I wonder if he can two-step.

Fuck! he says, again, and then, *Fuck it!*

Don't worry, I say, I'm sure the stains will wash out.

Wash out? he says. I just lost two tapes, some fucking asshole swiped two of my tapes.

People are staring at him and me, hearing him yell and swear. At me.

So on the first of the Heritage Days, I buy two cassette tapes from Corey Bespalko--two cassette tapes of his own *tsymbaly* music--to help make up for his tapes that were stolen. I feel terrible. If I hadn't been in his way, he would have caught the thieves.

Here, I say, handing him a twenty dollar bill.

His face flushes as he hands me my change and my cassettes. I guess I over-reacted, says Corey. It's no big deal. He strolls away, stuffing the twenty dollar bill in his pocket as he goes.

On the cover of the first cassette is an outdated photograph of Corey--taken at least three or four years ago. He looks thirteen, fourteen at the most; skinny and pimply, with dark growth on his upper lip. He is sitting behind his *tsymbaly* with the name of the album arched across his chest in block letters--*Corey Bespalko Dulcimer Favorites of Yesterday and Today*. All in all, the thing looks cheap. When I peer closely under the letters, I can tell that Corey's shirt is a little short in the sleeves, and it isn't really embroidered around the collar; someone's just sewn on red and black tape--the kind of cheap appliqué that is manufactured to look like embroidery. Cheap cheap cheap.

Then I tell myself maybe it's not his fault. Maybe he has no *Baba* to cross-stitch a shirt for him. Maybe his mother is a practical woman--why invest in a real embroidered shirt for her son when he's going to outgrow it in three months? Maybe he has no mother, no one to tell him that his sleeves are too short, that his appliqué collar is tacky. An orphan, making his living like a gypsy--almost like an Old Country *kobzar*, playing music in exchange for bread.

For his second album, *Corey Bespalko Ukrainian Dulcimer Favorites*, Corey has gotten hold of a real cross-stitched shirt and he's shaved his upper lip--otherwise, though, his second album cover looks just like his first. His face is washed out. The angle of the camera makes him look three feet tall and the *tsymbaly*, ten feet long. I wonder who took these pictures of Corey. I wonder who manages him, who promotes him. The whole image of Corey Bespalko needs to be jazzed up. How many teenaged *tsymbaly*-players exist in the world? How many *tsymbaly*-players under the age of fifty? He should be on tour, playing concert halls, making platinum records--not hawking crappy, second-rate cassette recordings in Edmonton, Alberta. A professional photographer, that's what he needs, and a graphic artist to lay out the album cover with some finesse. For album titles, something more exciting, more creative, more Ukrainian--*Corey Bespalko My Tsymbaly, My Music, My Love*. The word "dulcimer" has got to go.

On the second of the Heritage Days, I make my entrance onto the main stage thinking about Corey. I can't help it. My skirt is wrecked. Soaking it in Perfex for four-and-a-half hours at Auntie Helen-and-Uncle Dan's has served only to fade the burgundy embroidery into orange and purple. It's Corey's fault. It's Corey's fault that I can't concentrate on the dance. The *Podillian Polka* is a haughty dance, upper-class, regal, aristocratic. We're all supposed to keep our upper bodies stiff, our arms rigid; shoulders back, chin up. How can I keep my chin up knowing that I'm the only dancer on stage with a green ass and multi-colored stitching? As I dance, I relive my encounter with Corey. I said sorry and Corey didn't. I said sorry and it wasn't even my fault.

I decide that between this performance and the evening performance, I'll march over to Corey's *Dulcimer Demonstration and Instruction* tent and I'll tell him what I really think. Number one, thanks for the grass stains, buddy. For your information they never came out of my skirt. And number two, your album covers suck.

But there, in front of the main stage, in the audience, watching me dance, is Corey Bespalko. He is seated in the second row, so close to the stage that I can almost touch him. So close that when he smiles and mouths the words, *I'm sorry*, I can read his lips. By the end of the performance, I'm forced to alter my plans. Clearly, he's sorry about my skirt and he's come to watch me dance--to make amends, I suppose. It's only right that I should go and listen to him play.

Before walking over to Corey's tent, I wash my face, brush on some mascara, reapply deodorant, borrow a squirt of Jennifer's *Chanel*--without asking--and touch up my lipstick. I keep my costume on, despite its green stains. I could slip into street clothes--something light, tight, and slinky. Except that he's a *tsymbaly*-player--a Ukrainian outfit will really turn him on.

There are three other girls standing and talking to Corey in the tent. Groupies. They can't be more than thirteen, maybe fourteen years old. Skinny, runty groupies. *Kids*, I think. How pathetic. And they're throwing themselves at him, too, leaning across his *tsymbaly* in their tight cut-offs and their tight T-shirts. Bras, too. Two of them have the nerve to wear bras, as if they need bras for their little washboard chests. Corey is letting them touch his *tsymbaly* hammers, explaining to them how he made his albums--generally gloating, it seems. If he sees me, he pretends I'm not there. Me, in the corner, sweating under my layers of *Podillian* slips and aprons. Boots up to my knees, skirt halfway down to my ankles. The truth is, next to these girls, I look like a fat frump. I glance at my watch, I remember the light green patch on the back of my skirt. Turning to walk out, I wonder why I even bothered to come.

As I am leaving, though, Corey starts to play his *tsymbaly*, and the sound makes me stop. It knocks the wind out of me, as though someone has thrown a punch into my stomach, swung hard and hit me under the ribs. I see him playing, and then I can't move. He plays as if in slow motion, lifting his hammers over the *tsymbaly*, letting the hammers drop.

I didn't expect this. I only looked at the front of his albums--at his pictures--I didn't pay any attention to his song selections and I didn't even listen to his cassettes. I didn't have to listen. The names of his albums said it all--*Ukrainian Dulcimer Favorites, Dulcimer Favorites of Yesterday and Today*--they were a dead giveaway. I expected the old standards--polka music, old time waltzes--the stuff played by all musicians in all Ukrainian bands. The stuff of CFCW Ukrainian Hour. "Nasha Butterfly," "Spring-time Seven Step," "Stay All Nite Polka," "Red Shawl Tango." I thought I'd feel sorry for him. I thought he wouldn't be very good. I didn't expect this. He's playing *Tsyhanochka*. He's playing my song.

The groupies stay for *Tsyhanochka* but they talk non-stop through the performance. Of course. They don't know the meaning of the words to the song. Probably they don't even know that there *are* words to the song. I do. I know there are words. I know all of the Ukrainian words and I know their English translations. It's a love song sung by a man--a *kozak*--for his love, his little gypsy, his *tsyhanochka*. Of all the things Corey could have chosen to play. He must also know the words and their meanings.

Over and over again, in the refrain, the *kozak* sings, *Tsyhanochko moia, morhanochko moia, tsyhanochko morhanochko, chy liubysh ty mene?* My little gypsy, my girl with the twinkling eyes, gypsy girl, seductive girl, do you love me?

By the end of the song, she answers, *Shcho to za bandura, shcho ne khoche hrat? Shcho to za divchyna, shcho ne vmiie kokhat?* What is a *bandura* that doesn't want to play? What is a girl who cannot love?

Corey knows that I'm watching; every few bars he looks up, right at me. So I move closer to Corey and his *tsymbaly*, close enough that I can see beads of sweat on his nose and over his lips. It's hot in the tent. The hair along the back of his neck is wet, there are wet spots on his shirt, under his arms. He plays and sweats and looks up at me every few bars, and I sweat, too, just watching, and I fall in love, right there and then. First with his fingers, white half-moons rising under his fingernails, then with the white-blond hair on the back of his hands. I fall in love with his wrists, tanned brown, and thin. I fall for the thick, blue-green veins that run from his knuckles, up his forearms, to his elbows.

After he has played for me, Corey asks me to play for him, and I laugh. The groupies stop talking. I don't know how, I say. I haven't got a clue. Too many strings. I've never touched a *tsymbaly* before. As I'm making excuses, Corey takes my hand and seats me behind his *tsymbaly*. The groupies file out of the tent, one by one. I let him slip the hammers into my hands, and let him wrap his hands around my hands. Holding my hands in his, we play. Behind me, I can hear Corey breathing and I can feel the rise and fall of his chest. Alone in his tent, we play a medley of songs like this. *I shumyt, U horakh karpatakh. Nasha maty. Chorni ochka. Ivanku Ivanku.*

We play and play until Corey takes his hands away and I let the hammers drop onto the *tsymbaly* strings. Neither of us says a word. As I get up to go, sticky behind the knees from sitting so long in these layers and in this heat, Corey reaches for my hand and pulls me toward him. Over the *tsymbaly*, he kisses me on the lips, just barely, wet and soft. In the distance, now that our *tsymbaly* music has stopped, I can hear someone strumming a Spanish guitar, someone stomping a flamenco.

Later, lying awake in the dark, in my room at Auntie Helen-and-Uncle Dan's, I relive the kiss, my first kiss. I analyze it. I plan for the next kiss, promising myself that I'll do better the second time, be more adventurous. I'll move my lips more, close my eyes, experiment a little with my tongue. Turn my head sideways--first one way, then the other-- touch his face with my hands from time to time. I plan for the future, too. Next summer, we're going to Dauphin, Manitoba for the National Ukrainian Festival. Corey will be playing, instructing, and selling his tapes at a booth there, I'm sure of it. By then, he'll be finished with high school and ready for university. I daydream about Corey moving to Alberta--to Edmonton--and the two of us studying music together. I imagine us living together. I decorate the walls of our apartment.

On the third of the Heritage Days, when I make my entrance onto the main stage in the *Podillian Polka*, I scan the crowd to find Corey's face. It's my last day at the festival. I have seven hours between the morning and the evening performance--I plan to spend all seven of them with Corey. I look for Corey but it's my brother's face that I find. Wes. Beside Wes, Sophie. Beside Sophie, Mom and Dad, Auntie Helen, Uncle Dan. They're all waving, except Dad who, with his camera hanging around his neck, is making his way to the stage for a picture. Sophie is clapping along with the music. My mother is waving. I feel suddenly nauseous. Standing next to Sophie are Auntie Mary, Uncle Andy, and their daughter, Kalyna.

They all talk at once as I step off stage and walk toward them. We were overcome by guilt at Wolf Lake, says my mother, the lake just wasn't the same without you. The whole time, says Sophie, I had trouble getting my hook on the line and I didn't catch a single fish. Yes you did, says Wes, you did so catch fish. Sophie gives him a kick. Dad says, I couldn't live with myself, leaving my little girl all alone for three days--had to get a picture of my little girl on the main stage, he says, putting his arm around me and squeezing. Mom notices my skirt, lets out a shriek, then covers her mouth and comes closer to examine the stain. A few feet away, my aunts are clutching their purses--nervously, someone must have told them to watch for pickpockets--and waving to me, bravely; my uncles are drinking coffee from Styrofoam cups. All in all, it's a nightmare. I tell Dad that I'm not a little girl anymore.

Auntie Mary is the first to notice that Kalyna has wandered away. She spins around a few times, then gives her husband, Uncle Andy, a poke. Uncle Andy ignores Auntie Mary as he starts to take another sip of his coffee so she gives him a second poke--a harder one this time, hard enough to make him spill down the front of his sport shirt. Well Jesus Christ, he says, rubbing his shirt with a hankie, making the coffee stain worse. *Nai shliak ta ba trafiv.*

Your daughter's gone missing again, says Auntie Mary. Stop standing around and go look for her. Uncle Andy pours his coffee onto the grass, he crumples the Styrofoam cup in his hand. Kalyna, he mutters, walking away. Kalyna's been missing for a long time.

Auntie Mary and Uncle Andy aren't alarmed. None of us, actually, is the least bit surprised. We've come to expect Kalyna's disappearing act--she's always wandering off. It doesn't take much to catch her attention--bright colours, babies, puppies, music. One year during the Klondike Days Parade she followed a bright green 4-H float for two blocks before Uncle Andy caught up with her. She got lost last summer in West Edmonton Mall tracking a set of twins being pushed by their mother in a double stroller. I ask Sophie if she's seen any dogs. Sophie shakes her head, laughing. Nope, she says. No dogs. But there's music playing all over the park--Kalyna could be anywhere.

Without a second thought, I tell Auntie Mary that I know where Kalyna might be. Wait here, I say. I'll be right back.

I don't actually have a clue where Kalyna might be. I'm grabbing my last chance to be alone with Corey--to exchange addresses and phone numbers. To say goodbye. I run. I run like crazy, like a mad woman. Run like I've never run before, weaving through the crowd and bumping into people. It's not easy to run in my boots--they have two-inch heels that dig into the grass and threaten to slow me down. Once my ankle turns under and I nearly fall. But I can't stop. My ankle aches, my heart races, I feel my blouse sticking to my back. I can't stop. *Tsyhanochka* is in my head while I run. I can hear Corey calling out to me with his *tsymbaly*, his hands making the hammers dance over the strings. *Tsyhanochko moia, morhanochko moia, tsyhanochko morhanochko, chy liubysh ty mene?*

I stop outside Corey's tent to catch my breath and collect myself. I can hear *tsymbaly* music playing--Corey playing--and it brings a lump to my throat. Already I miss him. I tilt my head back, to keep the tears from spilling onto my cheeks. It doesn't work, so I wipe them with the sleeves of my blouse, leaving blue-black streaks of mascara on my cuffs. A woman in her thirties pushing a baby carriage passes by and, with a look of sympathy, she hands me a Kleenex from her pocket. I blow my nose. I take deep breaths. I pace. And just when I think that I can walk into the tent and face my beloved, he starts to play *Tsyhanochka*. Again. *Our* song. I give up. I'm ready to throw myself sobbing onto the grass.

But Corey is not alone in his tent, he's not alone at his *tsymbaly*. He has seated someone in my place, behind his *tsymbaly*; he has let someone else hold his hammers and he has wrapped his hands around someone else's fingers--the same way he wrapped his hands around my fingers. It's a girl, one of the groupies. The one without the bra. She's smiling and laughing the way I smiled and laughed. Together, she and Corey play *Tsyhanochka*, my song. I stand and I watch. I watch Corey pull her toward him. He brushes his lips against hers. My stomach turns.

Several minutes pass before I notice Kalyna seated on a chair--on the other side of the tent, the other side of the *tsymbaly*. I notice her because she starts to sing along with the *tsymbaly* music. Kalyna is wearing a white sundress dotted with big, red poppies; beneath the spaghetti straps of her dress, thick beige bra straps are showing. She's pinned a pink, plastic corsage over her right breast and tucked her hair under a bright blue golf hat--a ladies' golf hat, with a thin brim and a white pom-pom on the top. The pom-pom jiggles while Kalyna's head bobs up and down, side to side. Why does Auntie Mary let Kalyna dress herself?

I decide to leave the tent--to tell Auntie Mary and Uncle Andy where they can find their daughter. But then, as I am about to walk out of the tent, the *tsymbaly* music abruptly stops. Corey and the groupie exchange looks--he raises his eyebrows, she covers her mouth to stifle a giggle. Kalyna keeps singing, loud and clear, carefully enunciating the Ukrainian words. She sings a complete verse before she realizes that her *tsymbaly* accompaniment has ended. For a moment, she looks puzzled. Then a serious expression washes over her face and she raises her hands like a conductor--signaling for Corey to continue playing. The groupie laughs out loud, Corey looks away--embarrassed, fussing needlessly with his *tsymbaly*. Kalyna doesn't understand. She tries again, raising her hands to deliver the cue.

I can't let Kalyna go on like this, but I feel my face flush deep red as I put my arm gently around her shoulder, leading her out of the tent past Corey and the groupie.

Who are you? says Kalyna.

I'm your cousin, I whisper. I'm Colleen.

Oh! says Kalyna. Me too. She squeezes my hand and she laughs. Me too!

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While I lie on the floor of the bathroom, waiting for the room to stop spinning and for Salina to stop calling, she leaves five messages on the machine. She wants to talk. She wants to know what happened last night. She says she's coming by. She tells me that we *need* to talk. I unplug the answering machine.

Salina calls again--it must be her--and lets the phone ring forty times. Three times she calls like this, for a total of one hundred and twenty rings. I take the phone off its hook, then try to block out the sound of the dial tone. I lie on my back, holding the pillow over my face and down across my ears--can't breath, so I turn onto my stomach, wrapping the pillow around the back of my head and against my ears. Still can't breath, and the dial tone cuts through loud and clear. At last, it occurs to me that I should unplug the phone from the wall. Typical, I think. Just like me not to see the obvious.

I sleep most of the day, waking every so often for water. I don't bother with a glass. Instead, I bend my head into the kitchen sink and drink straight from the tap. At two o'clock, I feel well enough to eat half a slice of bread, toasted; by two thirty, I've puked it up. I tell myself that when I feel better, I'll walk to the corner store for ginger ale, soda crackers and Tylenol. Not 7-Up ginger ale or Sprite. Canada Dry. Canada Dry is what Mom gave us at home when we had the flu.

Wide awake in my bathroom bed--towels strewn on the bathroom floor--the evening comes back to me in pieces. I'm drinking straight vodka at the Future Bakery and Café--trying to drink my sorrows away, something I've never done before. And I'm laughing a lot--loudly--so that no one can tell how crushed I am about Barry. At Lee's Palace, I'm ordering doubles. Double vodkas. Midway through the night, someone else starts paying for my drinks. Not Barry. Barry leaves early with James. Salina? No. Salina is sitting at the other end of the table. It's Viraj. Yes, Viraj is bringing me doubles. Then we're slow-dancing--once? twice, maybe?--on the dance floor, Viraj and me. Later, the two of us are sharing a taxi home to my place. Oh God. And Salina is leaving by herself.

I didn't sleep with Viraj, this much I know. Because by the time we reach my apartment, the taxi has stopped several times for me to puke. My memory--from the time I entered my apartment to now--is sketchy, but I think that Viraj left his phone number beside the phone sometime between putting me to bed and slipping out the door. He was a perfect gentleman. Of course, Salina doesn't know this.

Six o'clock sharp, there is a knock at the door--it must be Salina. Then a voice calls out my name. Viraj's voice. I can't open the door, can't face him. There are three more knocks. What did I tell him last night? We did some kissing on the dance floor, I think. But I don't like him. Salina likes him, not me. I freeze and hold my breath and will Viraj to go away. Another three knocks, and then I hear footsteps down the stairs, silence outside my door.

When I open my eyes again it's nearly ten o'clock at night and I think the hangover is subsiding. I leave my bathroom bed, drink from the tap, open the window for fresh air. The mint toothpaste makes me gag a little but an hour later I'm well enough to dress. I even think that I'll get to the store and back. I bend over and put on my shoes, button my jean jacket. I swing open my door, and Salina is sitting in the stairwell, leaning against the wall. It looks as though she's been crying.

Viraj called me a few hours ago, she says, still sitting, her eyes on the floor. He asked me to check on you. He's worried that you got alcohol poisoning last night.

I start to explain to Salina that I'm fine, a little hungover, but otherwise fine. She interrupts me, mid-sentence.

Yeah, well, she says, to tell you the truth, I don't really give a shit how you're feeling. Salina lifts her eyes from the floor.

I'm sorry, I say. I *trusted* you, she says. Nothing happened, I say. I *thought* we were friends, she says.

Maybe if I were feeling better, if I were thinking clearer--I don't know. Maybe then I would be kinder to Salina, more apologetic. But I'm still a little nauseous from the alcohol, my head is still aching and spinning. I want her to leave me alone. So I tell Salina that I never asked for her friendship, I never asked that she barge in on me once a day with her stupid daytimer filled with stupid job opportunities. Once or twice, Salina tries to break in. I don't let her. Instead, I thank her for telling me that Barry is gay.

The more I talk, the louder my voice becomes. I tell her that I think her friends are cliquey and snobbish, that all they talk about is themselves. That I'm sick and tired of hearing about how great Toronto is and how great the University of Toronto is and how great the goddamned *Kids in the Hall* are. You know what? I say. Here's a news flash. To those of us who haven't lived in the great city of Toronto all our lives, the *Kids in the Hall* are *not funny*. Come to think of it, I say, you can all take your *Kids in the* FUCKING *Hall* and shove them! Pass the message along to your friends, I add, slamming the door in her face.

Over the next few days, Viraj leaves four or five messages on my machine before he takes the hint that I'm not interested. Salina doesn't call at all, or Barry. Several times I go to the phone, trying to muster up the courage to say that I'm sorry to someone--Barry, Viraj, Salina. I know that I've made mistakes. I even go so far as to practice a speech in which I apologize for drinking too much, for making Viraj think that I like him. For saying those awful things to Salina.

By Friday night, two full weeks later, it's impossible to make amends to anyone--I've waited too long. Just as well, I think. Salina is probably relieved, now, that I'm out of the picture, she has Viraj back. Barry probably hasn't noticed that I'm gone, he has James. So just who was I kidding, thinking that I could make friends here? I'm a solo act, always have been. Best that I stay that way.

Part Two

Sing For Me, Kalyna!

Hafford's festival is nothing compared to Vegreville's, and Vegreville's festival is really nothing compared to Dauphin's. It's common knowledge. Like the difference between St. Paul, Edmonton and Toronto. Good, better, best.

Hafford's festival is small-time, makeshift. In the middle of nowhere--all dry, dusty and flat. Nothing to do, nowhere to shop. No food kiosks, no flea markets. Not even a 7-Eleven. The guys in our dance group--Dennis Tymko, Stephan Melnychuk--don't call it Hafford, they call it Butt Fuck Saskatchewan. The girls in our group try to pretend they're not shocked. They say, Yeah, Hafford is such a hole.

Veg has a grandstand show, at least, and a pretty good one. The *Shumka* dancers usually do the *hopak* at the end or, once in a while, the *Cheremosh* ensemble. I prefer *Cheremosh*. Our dance instructor, Kevin, is the *Cheremosh* choreographer. Luba Goy, from the Royal Canadian Air Farce, did stand-up comedy on the grandstand one year. Sophie and I couldn't get her jokes--they were all in Ukrainian--but we laughed anyway, whenever the older people around us laughed. The year after, the *Flying Kozaks* came to Veg. Their jokes were mostly in English--with a few Ukrainian swear words like *hymno* and *sraka*--so we could make out all of the punchlines. And then, a year or two later, the Julio Iglesias singer came to Veg, straight from Ukraine. He wore tight satin trousers and a shirt unbuttoned to his navel--he was all curly black chest hair and ropy gold chains. Really, he was more a cross between Elvis and Tom Jones, but we called him Julio because the word for penis in Ukrainian is *khui*.

Dauphin, though, is *it*. The *National* Festival. It's got everything. Six or seven stages plus a grandstand plus beer gardens plus fireworks every night. It's the Vegas of

Ukrainian festivals. Street vendors sell *borshch*, kubie on a bun, *pyrohy*; there are buskers playing accordions, *bandury* and *tsymbaly*. During the festival, main street Dauphin, Manitoba, becomes one big open-air market just for Ukrainian T-shirts, Ukrainian souvenirs, and Ukrainian arts and crafts. The whole town goes Ukrainian. Walk into a restaurant and the menus are printed in the Cyrillic alphabet. There are parades every second day with floats decorated in red and black paint, red and black balloons, red and black plastic flowers. Town council hangs white cloth embroidered with red and black thread on the street lamps. The local radio stations play nothing but Ukrainian music and the disc jockeys talk more in Ukrainian than in English. In Dauphin, during the festival, you feel nothing but pride--pride in being a Ukrainian. You want to shout what you are to the world. *Ukrainka*! It's Ukrainian heaven.

So we've heard. None of us have been to Dauphin before. We're going for the first time this summer.

Two dance groups from our dance club are competing in Dauphin: the Intermediates, my group, and the Seniors, Sophie's group. There are sixty of us in total--plus four parent-chaperones--and we're going in a posh Greyhound that has a flushing toilet, reclining seats and movies. Getting there will take three days and nights. Once we arrive in Dauphin, we're all staying together on the outskirts of the town. In a campground. In unlockable tents.

The Babiuk twins--Mark and Lyle--are in Sophie's group. Tanya Yuzko and I are in love with Mark; Tammy Yuzko and Sophie are in love with Lyle. The twins are older than all of us--older, more sophisticated, wild, crazy. They'll try anything. And they're very hot. For months the chaperones have been sending letters to parents ensuring that supervision on the trip will be strict. The list of rules is endless. No girls in the boys' tents; no boys in the girls' tents. Curfew: ten o'clock. No stereos, no Walkmans, no cut-off shorts, no faded jeans. For the girls, no nail polish, no halter tops. Duffel bags will be searched, the chaperones have declared. Absolutely no alcohol. Absolutely no drugs. We must look and behave like decent, clean-cut boys and girls. The Babiuk twins are planning to carry Walkmans, earphones, tapes, playing cards, cigarettes and even *joints* in places the chaperones will never look--their dancing boots. They're injecting vodka into oranges with hypodermic needles.

For a long time, I don't know which is more important to me, performing at the National Festival or traveling to the National Festival. But three weeks before we are scheduled to leave, it becomes clear to me for the first time that--more than anything--I want to perform and I want to win and nothing else matters. It happens near the end of our last pre-Dauphin rehearsal, midway through the *hopak*, just as our lift is picking up speed and momentum.

The lift is one of the more prestigious *hopak* solos. Three boys link arms to form a circle; three girls sit on the boys' linked arms, balancing themselves with their hands on the boys' shoulders. Then, while the boys spin the circle clockwise, the girls lift their legs upward and outward, pointing their toes. When a girl is chosen for the lift, it means that she is light enough to be carried but also strong enough to extend her legs for the duration of the solo. From the air, the girls' legs are supposed to look like the points of a star or the petals of a flower in bloom.

For the lift in our *hopak*, I'm supposed to sit on the linked arms of Brad Trachuk and Trevor Topolnisky. The problem is that they're pigs. Every rehearsal, they grip and squeeze my bottom while the lift is in motion, knowing that I can't do anything to stop them without sabotaging the solo itself and interrupting the whole dance practice. Today, though, at the last pre-Dauphin rehearsal, I can't stand it anymore. I push myself off the arms of Brad Trachuk and Trevor Topolnisky--off their arms, onto the gymnasium floor.

And I land hard, my right leg twisting and folding under the weight of my body. For a long time I lie on the gymnasium floor, holding my knee, rocking back and forth. I say every bad word I can think of. Then there is the ordeal of getting up and out of the school, getting into Kevin's car, getting from the car to the hospital.

I don't cry--through it all, not once do I cry. Not until I am alone in Kevin's car with Kevin, parked in front of my house. Not until he looks out the driver's side window, then down at the steering wheel, then out the window again--never turning to face me. Kevin knows how badly I want to go to Dauphin. He doesn't want to tell me that our dances must now be rearranged--that another girl will have a chance at the lift. Of course, he doesn't have to say anything. I already know. My right leg, from the middle of my thigh to the middle of my calf, is tightly strapped and harnessed and caged. Nobody dances in Dauphin with a knee brace.

Several days later, as I sulk over supper, Mom comes up with the idea that I go to Dauphin anyway and enter in the vocal competition. To heck with dancing, she says, jumping up from the kitchen table to fetch her little yellow songbook, *Let's Sing Out in*

Ukrainian. In fact, Mom doesn't finish her supper. She immediately starts to select songs.

Cherez balku is a lovely song for a young woman to sing, she says.

Dad hums a few bars and frowns. Too depressing, he says, I'd go with *Chervona rozha* or *Chaban*.

Mom ignores him while he sings the opening bars of *Chaban*. She turns to me. You know, she says, your great-*baba*'s favourite song was *Cherez balku*.

Mom pauses. Dad stops singing.

Mom says, You have to learn *Cherez balku* before I go to my grave--now is as good a time as any.

For a faster one, says Dad, lifting his eyebrows, there's *Oi chorna*.

Mom grins, then, and the two of them start to sing together. *Oy chorna ia sy chorna. Oy chorna iak tsyhanka*. It must be their song. Dad grabs her around the waist and they polka around the kitchen table.

I think it's a marvelous idea. A brilliant idea. The best idea I've ever heard. I want to hug and kiss my mother, I want to polka with my father. As Mom and Dad dance around the kitchen, into the living room, and down the hallway, I make plans. I'll wear my *Bukovynian* costume--the skirt is long enough to cover my brace--boots and headpiece included, of course. I'll accompany myself on guitar, unless the festival organizers provide a pianist. I'll introduce my song in Ukrainian. Best that I borrow Sophie's *Bukovynian* blouse, the one embroidered in orange and yellow--it will match the gold medal better than my blouse embroidered with red thread. Should I have a speech prepared in Ukrainian for the awards ceremony?

Just as I am contemplating the possibility of a record company approaching me in Dauphin to sign a contract for a Ukrainian album, Sophie reminds me--and Mom and Dad--that I have no means of traveling to Dauphin. Because I'm unable to dance with my group, I'm also unable to travel on the bus. It's a dancers-only bus.

In no time at all, Mom and Dad resolve to come along to Dauphin--to make a trip of it with the motor home. Dad slaps his knee. Dammit, Mom, he says, we should have thought of this a long time ago. We'll make a holiday of it!

Over the next few days, the house becomes a hub of arrangements and plans. There are menus to be drawn up, groceries to be bought, clothes to pack, bedding to be washed. Dad has to clean the motor home inside and out, service it, fill it with water. And before all else--above all else--the Yuzkos must be contacted. John Yuzko--J.Y.--is Dad's best friend; he and Dad bought identical motor homes three years ago. Neither goes anywhere in his motor home without the other.

Dad and J.Y. chart the entire route to Dauphin. They find out where the best campgrounds and RV parks are--the ones with water and power hook-ups. They buy guides to Saskatchewan and Manitoba. They use highlighting pens to mark which sites to see, which berries to pick; the smooth highways, the good lakes, the worthwhile landmarks. Mom and Yolande Yuzko bake casseroles and squares to keep in the motor home freezers; they shop for new cassettes--8-tracks--for the ride. Mom gets two Gordon

Lightfoots and one Irish Rovers; Yolande gets one Kenny Rogers, one Johnny Cash, and one Anne Murray. The plan is to swap every so often.

Since I have no other way to get to Dauphin, I'm excited about the trip. I want to go. I want to sing. I want to *win*. Mark Babiuk becomes a distant, foggy memory. Tanya Yuzko, Tammy Yuzko and Sophie, on the other hand, are livid. They're determined to go on the bus, and they're angry at me. *I'm* the reason, after all, that the motor home idea was conceived. They won't go in the motor homes.

As we sit in Sophie's bedroom, discussing the trip, Tammy and Tanya say that they're telling their parents tonight; Sophie is breaking the news to Mom and Dad at supper.

I don't give a shit, says Tammy, glaring at me, I never asked them to plan this stupid motor home trip.

They're adults, says Sophie, they'll be disappointed at first but they'll get over it.

From the window of Sophie's bedroom, we all can see Dad and J.Y. polishing their motor homes, laughing. They are sharing a bottle of window cleaner and shining up their respective bumpers. When Dad and J.Y. notice us looking out the window of Sophie's bedroom, they wave, grinning from ear to ear. They hold up matching cardboard signs that they've made for the back windows of the motor homes. In red felt pen, the signs say, *Dauphin or Bust!*

In the end, Sophie, Tammy, and Tanya can't bring themselves to disappoint our dads. So the day of departure arrives and they board the motor homes with long faces.

Sometimes the Yuzko girls ride in our motor home, sometimes Sophie rides in their motor home. Each time our motor home caravan passes a Greyhound, the three of them give pained looks to each other--but not to me. They don't deal me into their card games, they roll their eyes when I sing along to an 8-track playing on the motor home stereo. Once or twice, in their most sarcastic voices, they address me, thanking me for ruining their chances with Mark and Lyle. Thanks, they say. Thanks a lot. Boy is *this* trip going to be *fun*. And all because of you, Colleen.

For the most part, though, I sit by myself on the couch in the back of the motor home, where I can stretch out my right leg and rub my knee. From time to time, I run over the words to the songs I will be performing in Dauphin. From time to time, I look over at my sister as she talks and laughs with the Yuzko girls around the motor home kitchen table. It's not like her to do this to me.

Sophie does turn around occasionally to give me a wink or a sympathetic glance--but that's all. She doesn't come over and sit with me or ask me to join them at the table. She just turns to me and smiles. After a while, when Sophie turns to me, I turn away from her. It's my first solo act.

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I find them in the Classified sections of newspapers and free entertainment publications--bands advertising for new members, that is. During my time with Barry and Salina, I lost sight of my goals, forgot my priorities. Searching through the "Musicians Wanted" portions of the papers is the first step to starting over.

What I need, first and foremost, is a band. Eventually, of course, I'll go solo--just me and my guitar. But everyone starts with a band to gain experience, to make connections in the industry. In the mornings, I pick up a latté, a *Toronto Star* and a *Toronto Sun*; while I eat lunch, I flip through *Now* magazine. With a red felt pen, I strike out unappealing ads; with a pink highlighting pen, I mark the promising ads. I try to keep an open mind, consider every possibility.

The first ad I see is no good. WANTED FEMALE NON-DRINKER. KEYS & VOCALS FOR ESTABLISHED ETOBICOKE CHRISTIAN METAL BAND. Out with the red pen. Even if I were Christian, which I'm *not*, metal music is out of the question. I pause momentarily on the CELTIC-COUNTRY-CALYPSO ACT that's looking for a vocalist and accordion player. I sing, of course, and the accordion is semi-related to the piano. Of course, I've never played the accordion. I know nothing about playing the accordion. Most importantly, I don't *have* an accordion. I don't imagine that I'll become an accordion player any time soon.

A couple of the ads are completely unreadable. How could anyone understand this? I ask myself, as I stare at an ad for a keyboard player with CHOPS and GOOD KARMA to LAY FAT ZAPPAHOLIC GROOVES. What's a ZAPPAHOLIC GROOVE? I read the next ad out loud, hoping that it will make more sense spoken. 2 SELF TAUGHT CATS SEEKING HYPNOTECHNIC SAUCER FULL OF BARE TREES NASH AND CRIMSON ECOUSTIC GUITACONGAFLUTSITAR. What a mouthful. And then there is the VOLATILE KEYBOARD PLAYER wanted for a 70'S CLASSIC ROCK PROJECT. Surely the person who placed the ad made a mistake? It should read "versatile," surely, instead of "volatile"?

After scanning seventeen ads in a row--seventeen complete duds--I'm alternately biting my nails and chain-smoking. The newspapers in front of me are covered in red X's. The leader of a band that exclusively plays Grateful Dead covers is looking for a Jerry Garcia. A Bob Marley Revival group needs a steel drummer. Bass players capable of singing backup vocals appear to be in great demand. There are several bands advertising for musicians to help cut demos of original music--bands with influences like the Rolling Stones, U2, Lynyrd Skynyrd, CCR, Led Zeppelin. No one lists female influences, let alone female folk influences. I find one ad for a female musician--JAZZ DUO SEEKS FEMALE VOCALIST TO FORM TRIO. B.MUS. A MUST.

I have no choice, really. The BLUE LOTUS KILLER BOP COMBO is the only viable option that I come across--their ad is short but intelligible, and I fit the bill, more or less. ESTABLISHED BAND WITH GIGS SEEKS VOCALIST, MALE OR FEMALE. INSTRUMENT AN ASSET. CALL PAT, BLUE LOTUS KILLER BOP COMBO. I'm female, I'm a vocalist. I play an instrument. Before I change my mind or talk myself out of it, I'm on the phone to Pat, then out the door, guitar in hand. Pat seems normal enough. What have I got to lose? There are three of them, three guys; all guitar players, from what I can tell. They're my age, roughly--nineteen, twenty years old at the most. For a long time I stand at the base of the stairs before they notice me. They're too preoccupied with their guitars in a corner of their unfinished basement to see me. And with the perpetual buzzing of amps, the twanging of guitar strings, they don't hear me come in.

The basement smells dank and musty--there are ashtrays and empty beer bottles half-filled with cigarette butts. The old piece of brown shag carpet that they've thrown onto the concrete floor is dotted with cigarette burns. The walls are concrete. On one side of the room, they've nailed a poster of Steven Tyler--*Columbia Hotel 1974*--holding a cigarette in one hand and a joint in the other. On another wall, with nails and wire, they've hung a framed portrait of a pastel Elvis painted in oil on velvet.

Two guys sit with electric guitars across their knees on opposite ends of a dingy green couch the centre of which sags to the floor--one guy appears to be tuning his guitar, the other is playing the opening bars of "Stairway to Heaven" again and again. A third guy stands next to two beige amps stacked one on top of the other--he plays a quick riff on his guitar, fiddles with the buttons of the amp, plays the riff again, fiddles some more. Beside him is a three-legged stool with a triangular leather seat on which "Tijuana" has been printed with black shoe polish. A single light bulb swings from the ceiling.

I clear my throat several times. I say, Yoo-hoo! Hell-oh-oh! And then, losing my patience, I yell, HEY! All three guys look up and in my direction at the same time, swinging their long hair over their shoulders in unison.

The guy beside the beige amps--the obvious leader and spokesman of the band, the guy I must have spoken to on the phone, Pat--looks up. You must be the chick who called, he says, playing an elaborate riff on his guitar.

Pat says that he needs a smoke. He lights up a cigarette and then tucks it under the top two strings of his guitar near the end of the fingerboard so that his hands are free to play while he gives a brief history of the Blue Lotus Killer Bop Combo.

We're not really married to the name, says Pat, it was Pete's idea.

One of the guys on the couch--Pete, apparently--gives me a lethargic wave.

Pat says, Paul is compiling a list of alternate band names.

The other guy on the couch--Paul apparently--grins upon hearing his name.

Pat continues. He says, Pete here plays a six-string Sunburst Strat with a Classic Tube distortion pedal and a hundred-watt Peavey. Paul's got a Les Paul--funny, eh?--rosewood fingerboard, two humbucking pick-ups. He uses a little sixty-watt Mesa/Boogie, broke the volume nob cranking it full-blast.

Paul interrupts. I'm getting a better amp, says Paul, glaring at Pat.

Ignoring Paul and rubbing the neck of the guitar in his hand, Pat whispers, This is my baby. It's a '79 American Telecaster--cost me big coin. A lot of guys get Teles made by Japs or Mexicans. They're crap. Mine's the genuine article. And that's my amp over there. Marshall stack, two hundred-watt heads, eight twelve-inch Celestion G12 speakers. It's classic, 1969.

So, says Pat, turning to me. You said on the phone that you play guitar. What have you got?

What have I got? I don't know what to say. I have a guitar. What kind of guitar do I have? A Fender, I think. There must be more to it, but I don't know guitar jargon. While Pat waits for me to respond, he plays the same riff he's been playing the whole time that I've been in this basement. I'm starting to think it's the only riff he knows.

You know music? asks Pat.

I pause for a moment, thinking of what I should say. Twelve years Royal Conservatory. Grade Ten Piano, Harmony, History, Counterpoint. ARCT Teaching Certificate, First Class. Two years ethnomusicology--Zulu, Xhosa and Tswana choral arrangement and Township Jive transcription. I doubt that any of it would impress him.

Pat says, We're sort of looking for someone with some training and some experience. Actually, to tell you the truth, we were hoping for a guy. No offense or anything. He plays the infernal riff, then smiles at me. Smugly.

It's all right, I tell myself, tightening my grip on the handle of my guitar case. *You don't want to be in this band anyway.* I turn to leave.

Then, for a moment, Pat stops playing. The thing is, he says, you're the only person who answered our ad, and we've got a gig coming here pretty quick. So.

He pulls the three-legged stool toward me, the "Tijuana" stool with the triangular leather seat.

Let's see what you can do.

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By Yorkton, I can sing along to all the Johnny Cash songs and I've decided that my favorite is *Folsom Prison Blues*. I feel an intimate connection with Johnny Cash as I've been feeling blue since we crossed the Alberta/Saskatchewan border in the middle of Lloydminster. Saskatchewan is depressing.

Dad and J.Y., on the other hand, find something to marvel at in Saskatchewan every few minutes. Before the trip, they rigged up C.B. radios and now they use them constantly. In fact, Dad and J.Y. talk more when they are on the C.B. radios than they do when they are face-to-face. It's part of the adventure for them. They use all the authentic C.B. lingo--Breaker 1-9 and 10-9 and 10-4. Dad's handle is Lemon Hart One, J.Y.'s handle is Lemon Hart Two--for their favourite rum.

Once in a while, Dad tries to start conversations with truckers. It doesn't work. He says, Breaker 1-9 to all you truckers out there. Nobody answers. He says, Breaker 1-9, Breaker 1-9, this is Lemon Hart One calling out to the big rigs on Highway 16. How are you doing out there in C.B.-land? Finally, after several tries, one trucker responds to Dad's call. The trucker tells Lemon Hart One to get on another channel.

So Dad and J.Y. switch to another C.B. channel and the two of them talk about how the rape-seed crops will be, the rising price of cattle, the falling price of grain. Their recurring argument is about how much rain Saskatchewan has been getting--J.Y. says an inch and a half, Dad says a half an inch. By the time we reach the Manitoba border, I'd like to settle the matter once and for all. None. No rain has fallen on Saskatchewan. Ever.

I'm on the motor home toilet when we roll into Dauphin--Tanya yells at me through the motor home washroom door to come and look. In the excitement of arriving at our destination, she's forgotten to be angry with me. We sit on opposite sides of the motor home kitchen table and watch through the window as the "Welcome to Dauphin" sign passes. We look for the neon Cyrillic signs, we listen for the polka music down main street. We look for Kubie-On-A-Bun vendors, Ukrainian Bookstores. It doesn't look at all like Las Vegas, it looks like a small town. There is one hotel, The Dauphin Hotel, and one Chinese restaurant, The Dauphin Dragon. Cars park diagonally on main street. No festival signs, no festival banners--no indication whatsoever that the *National* Ukrainian Festival is to take place here. Nothing is red, in fact, except the sign for Kentucky Fried Chicken.

The festival hasn't started yet, I say to Tanya as Dad pulls into the RV park. Tanya nods. She says, Tomorrow probably things will pick up. I nod.

At eleven-thirty a.m. the next morning--the first morning of the festival--our dance groups arrive at Dauphin Town Hall for the opening parade: sixty dancers plus the four parent chaperones--Mr. and Mrs. Demkiw, Mr. and Mrs. Faryna--plus the Yuzkos and the Lutzaks. We've all known about this day for months. The parade is to begin downtown at noon and then wind its way to the festival grounds. It's like the opening ceremonies of the Olympics.

All of the festival participants are to march in groups carrying flags and banners to identify themselves. Our mothers have worked for weeks sewing an enormous white banner on which they stitched our dance club's name--in English and in Ukrainian--with blue thread. *Desna* Д е сна. Plus our MLA gave us a big Alberta flag and two hundred miniature Alberta flags. At eleven-thirty--each of us waving two tiny Alberta flags--we are a sea of blue. A proud sea of Alberta blue.

By noon, however, when no other dancers have yet arrived, we're starting to get nervous. Dad runs up the steps to Town Hall. He tries to open the door. It's locked. The dancers--all in full costume--get restless. The girls waste no time in peeling off their velvet vests and headpieces. It's hot in Manitoba--hot and humid. Their noses bead with sweat, their make-up runs in the heat of the midday sun. The Babiuk twins develop matching wet stains under their arms.

By twelve thirty, Dad and J.Y. are looking very worried; together with Mr. Faryna and Mr. Demkiw, they quietly discuss the situation. All of the men rub the sweat from their foreheads with handkerchiefs and the women find shade under various trees around Town Hall. It's decided that we will wait until two o'clock and then reassess the situation. Tanya, Tammy and Sophie tell me they're going to die, over and over again.

I'm going to die of sunstroke, says Tanya.

I'm dying, says Tammy.

Colleen, says Sophie, this is worse than death.

At quarter to two, one of the guys from the Seniors group marches over to the chaperones and says, If you don't get us the hell out of this heat we're hitchhiking home.

That's when the parade of dancers arrives--dancers with banners and flags. Out of nowhere. They descend on us like a thundercloud, like a hail storm--like a plague of locusts. The *Volya* dancers from Saskatoon, *Trembita* from Sudbury. They come dancing and singing. Vancouver's *Dazhboh* Ensemble, Kamloops' *Skomorokhy* Ensemble--hoards of them, hundreds of them, smiling and laughing. *Sopilka*, *Kateryna*, *Vesna*, and *Dumy*--all the Ukrainian dance groups from every corner of Manitoba are in attendance.

We are the laughing stock of the festival. The parade has started today as it always starts--at the festival grounds. The participating dancers have marched today as they always march--*toward* Town Hall. Someone in our dance club must have misunderstood.

Over the next few day, things don't improve for our dance club, they only get worse. On the second day of the festival, our Senior Girls' *Lemko* Ribbon Dance is disqualified from their category. The judges say that the *Lemko* costumes are inauthentic. During the third day of competition, our Intermediate Girls' *Bukovynian* Wedding Dance comes in fourth; the girls are criticized for ill-executing a number of steps. Our Senior Boys' *Hutsul* dance--the same dance that took gold in Hafford and Vegreville--takes bronze here in Dauphin. The Senior Group's *Hopak* comes in last in their category. We can't understand it. No one in our dance club has ever taken less than silver away from competition. We've never had problems with our costumes. This is an outrage.

On the eve of the fourth and last day of competition, the Demkiws and Farynas walk over from their campsite to our campsite. For an emergency meeting. All of the adults slip into the Yuzko motor home and lock the door. Sitting in lawn chairs outside the motor home, Tammy, Tanya, Sophie and I can hear drinks being poured and quiet conversation. The men say, *Dai Bozhe*. There is some laughter. But then, just as Tammy is suggesting that we make our way to the dancers' campsite, Mrs. Demkiw starts raising her voice. Outside, we all stop talking instantly--Tammy and Tanya look at each other, Sophie and I look at each other.

Mrs. Demkiw yells, Inauthentic costumes? Kevin Kowalchuk is a good instructor. He did six months of research in Ukraine. In *Ukraine*! Six months in Ukraine and they're going to tell me our costumes are inauthentic?

Mrs. Demkiw is head of the ladies' Costume Committee, she must feel responsible. *Discrimination*, she hollers. It's because we're from Alberta. This is *discrimination*!

Then Mr. Faryna starts up. He says, I never trusted that Kowalchuk, never from day one. I even told my wife. I told Freda. I told her right from day one there'd be trouble with him. I know Kowalchuks from way back, I went to school with Kowalchuks. You know what they are? Goddamn *Poles* is what they are. Our kids have been dancing in goddamn Polish costumes because their instructor is a goddamn Pole!

After Mr. Faryna has had his say, Mrs. Demkiw pipes up again. She says that Mr. Faryna doesn't know what the hell he's talking about. Then *Mrs.* Faryna joins in, defending her husband and calling down Mrs. Demkiw. I hear Dad trying to break in, trying to calm everybody down. He suggests that maybe the competition is a bit stiffer here in Dauphin. It is the National Festival, after all. For the first time ever, our dancers are coming up against the best in the country. Mr. Faryna bangs his fist on the motor home table. We *are* the best in the country! he says.

The inside of the Yuzko's motor home becomes quiet for a moment. We can hear the murmuring of voices, the clinking of glasses. Mom pops her head out of the door. Bring Kleenex from our motor home, she whispers, Mrs. Demkiw is crying. Not a moment later, the door of the motor home opens again. This time, it's Dad asking us to fetch a bottle of Lemon Hart from our motor home. And pour yourselves a shot, he says. You've got your work cut out for you tomorrow, Kalyna. He gives me a wink.

Coming up against the best in the country. Dad's words echo in my ears as I sip my rum and Coke next to Tanya, Tammy, and Sophie. I drift out of their conversation. Tomorrow, I am singing in the vocal competition. And the more I sip, the more I see the gravity of the job that lies before me. I must win--not for my own sake but for the sake of the group, for the sake of the team. For the glory of *Desna*! Maybe my gold medal will prove that we are good, authentic Ukrainians after all. Maybe my gold medal will mend the wounds of the ladies' Costume Committee. In my head, I go over the introduction to my song, the words of my song, the guitar chords of my accompaniment. I feel as though I am going to do battle in the morning--going to do battle with the best this country has to offer.

It's almost too fated. The last of our dancers lose on the morning of the fourth day of competition. I am the last of *Desna* to compete. I am *Desna's* last hope. Everyone from our group--dancers and parents alike--is in the audience watching, cheering me on. The Babiuk twins are holding up the *Desna* banner, Sophie is swinging the enormous Alberta flag. The other dancers carry the two hundred tiny Alberta flags. They are, once again, a proud sea of Alberta blue.

It's almost too easy. I'm the last to sing in the Senior Girls' Vocal Solo category so I see just who--what--I'm up against. Three girls in black slacks and embroidered blouses who will each, one at a time, go to the mike. I wonder if they will each sing the same song? All three of them have bad skin and long blond hair--stringy blond hair with brown roots. They look so similar that I think they must be sisters.

The first of the three is accompanied by an accordion player; she takes the microphone into her hands but holds it near her waist--even from my place in the front row, I can hardly make out a word of her song. The second of the three, taking note of the first singer's mistake, shoves the mike right up against her lips--the action makes the amp squeal. It's painful. I have to cover my ears. And though the second girl, too, is accompanied by the accordion player, she drifts remarkably through six or seven keys in the span of her song. Quite a feat, I think. Finally, the third girl takes her turn on stage. Her voice isn't nearly as weak as the previous two singers and she manages to stay in the same key as the accordion player. I think I've almost met my match. Then, just as I am prepared to grant that she will take second place at least, she forgets her words. Several awkward seconds pass during which she fidgets uncomfortably, making gestures for the accordion player to keep going while she tries to get her bearings back. It's obviously hopeless. The third singer bursts into tears and runs off stage.

Walking onto the stage, I feel a little sorry for the three girls with their bad skin, their limp hair, their *baba* slacks--Fortrel, I'm sure--and their spiritless performances. I'm wearing my complete *Bukovynian* costume--my yellow boots, my black wool skirt, Sophie's blouse embroidered elaborately on the sleeves with orange and yellow thread. My vest is made from soft sheepskin leather and black sheepskin wool. I'm hot, of course. So hot that I can feel sweat trickling down my chest and back, and down the backs of my legs. But the heat, the sweat--it will all seem worth it when I hold up my gold medal, *Desna*'s first.

On stage, my first move is to dismiss the accordion player; my second is to strap on my guitar and do some last minute tuning. And then, before I sing, I introduce my song in Ukrainian--something that sets me apart from my competitors before I even begin to sing, for they didn't say a word before they began to sing. *Ya zaspivaiu sohodni odnu pisnu--Chervona rozha.* I say it with energy, with confidence. I say it knowing that the rest of the performance is just a formality. The gold medal is as good as mine.

Still, I give all my heart and soul to *Chervona rozha. The Red Rose.* I feel my voice filling the stage and the seating area, I feel it soaring over the audience and across the concession stands. People turn from their hot dogs to the stage. They clap and tap their feet. Old people smile and nod. In the back row, the *Desna* dancers and parents wave--some run up to the stage to take pictures. Mark Babiuk sticks two fingers into his mouth and whistles before I've even finished. At the end of my song, there is applause like I've never heard before--thunderous applause that goes on for several minutes. Strangers in the crowd stand up and applaud, there are calls for an *encore*. In the front row, the three girls in the Fortrel slacks look glum.

For the awards presentation, all four of us are called onto the stage. It strikes me as particularly cruel--one of the four, after all, is destined to receive no medal. As the bronze medalist is announced, I applaud with the rest of the audience. It's Louisa Marianych, the second of my three competitors. She tries hard to smile as she accept her medal, but the disappointment in her eyes is hard to miss. The first of my three competitors gets the silver medal. Lilliana Marianych. So they're sisters after all, I think to myself. Lilliana hardly looks at her silver medal; she turns, instead, to the third sister on the stage.

I look, too, at the Marianych sister who is left on stage, the girl who sang third in the competition. She is looking down at her feet and biting her bottom lip as she shifts her weight from leg to leg. I wish that I could console her--tell her that she's obviously more deserving of a medal than her sisters. She's a much better singer. I'd like to tell the judges. It's not her fault that she forgot her words, she was just nervous.

Just before the gold medal winner is awarded, Louisa and Lilliana Marianych move close to their sister, the girls whose name I don't know; they each grab hold of one of her hands, so that she isn't alone during the final moment of the adjudication, and they take turns whispering in her ear--to comfort her, I think. All three sisters--their arms linked, like one entity--look directly at me as my name is announced.

I expected to feel--I don't know. More victorious, somehow, more *triumphant*. I expected to want to wave to the crowd, like a beauty pageant winner; to want to strut across the stage, holding my gold medal in the air. The members of *Desna* clap and whistle, but they aren't looking at me, aren't cheering for me. I'm sure of it. They're applauding the Marianych sisters as, one by one, they shake my hand, congratulate me. There are tears in their eyes. The sisters tell me that I deserved to win. You are so good, they say. So good.

Only, I don't feel so good. On the way home from Dauphin, my gold medal packed into my guitar case, I don't feel good at all. While *Folsom Prison Blues* plays again on the 8-track stereo, I see the Marianych girls with their limp hair and their baggy slacks. I hear their voices, thin and weak. I feel their hands, cold, clammy. Probably if it had been the other way around--if one of the Marianych sisters had won the gold medal--I would have congratulated her and smiled at her and said, You're so good.

Would I have meant it?

I replay all of my mean thoughts about the Marianych girls' clothes, their voices, their stage presence, and I try to imagine the courage that it must have taken for the Marianych girls to get up and sing. Without fancy costumes, without leather boots. It was their first time on stage, clearly. I try to imagine the courage that it must have taken for them to get through their first medal presentation, to stand next to me on stage. To shake my hand. There were tears in their eyes. Because of me. They may never sing again. Because of *me.* I knew that the competition wasn't fair. If I were a *good* person, I would have bowed out altogether.

Probably I should have bowed out. My win hasn't helped *Desna* in the least--hasn't meant a thing to *Desna.* The Demkiws and Farynas are angry as ever--they've vowed that *Desna* will never to return to Dauphin--and we've all left the festival early, before the closing ceremonies.

When we get home, Mom plops herself down on a chair in the kitchen. She says, Bring me that medal of yours, Colleen. I want to have a good look at it!

We are all sitting around the kitchen table--the Yuzko family and our family--talking about our trip to Dauphin. As Mom talks, Sophie, Tammy, and Tanya turn toward me--sadly, I think. They haven't won any medals in Dauphin. Like the Marianych sisters, they've come home empty-handed.

Come on! says Mom. I want to see what my *National* Women's Vocal Champion has come home with!

But I have nothing to show for my performance. I've long since flushed my medal down the motor home toilet, and Dad has long since dumped the sewage from the trip.

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First rehearsal--and I see the guys have made an effort to clean up the basement. Very sweet of them, I think. They've emptied the ashtrays, lined up all the empty beer bottles--neatly--beside the couch. On the top, left-hand corner of the Elvis picture and on the bottom, right-hand nail of the Steven Tyler poster they've hung air fresheners--little green cardboard Christmas trees, the kind that are made for the interiors of cars. The guys have spruced even themselves up. Paul is wearing bright white socks and dark blue jeans--all brand new, I'm sure. Pat's hair is wet, slicked back into a ponytail at the nape of his neck; he must have shaved before I arrived--there are tiny cuts on his chin and on his neck, some still bleeding. The whole place smells faintly of evergreen boughs and *Brute 33*.

Pete, though, is conspicuously absent. It seems odd to me that he's not here. In my mind, I picture Pat and Pete and Paul as one entity, joined at the hip. Like Siamese triplets. Like Three Musketeers. What could Pete be doing without the others?

While I take off my shoes, I say, Hey Pat, Paul--where's Pete? I feel like I'm a character in a Dr. Seuss book. Paul yells from behind his amp that Pete is picking up some beer. Then Paul says, Now's the perfect time to prepare her, Pat.

Prepare me? I say. For what?

Pete's deaf, says Paul.

Prick! Pat yells over his shoulder to Paul. Paul's such a prick, Pat says to me. Pete wears hearing aids. It's not like you need to learn sign language or anything.

Pat continues, glaring at Paul. His right ear is better than his left. He has some trouble in crowded places--you know, like bars--where there are lots of people talking and background noise. So he compensates by reading lips. He's an awesome lip-reader.

As Pat is telling me this, Pete appears. Out of a brown paper bag he pulls two six-packs. I study Pete's head as it bobs about the paper bag and there they are--two hearing aids, pale pink and smooth, tucked into his ears like little embryos. Pete lifts four bottles of *Calypso-Berry* vodka coolers out of the bag. The coolers, I assume, are for me. Girl drinks. They're bright pink.

I say, Thanks for the coolers. Pete doesn't answer.

As I make my way to the couch, cooler in hand, I try to look relaxed and at ease. I do my best to *stroll* across the room, as though these sort of rehearsals are second nature to me--as though I've worked with scores of hearing-impaired guitarists. I fake a yawn, like I'm half-bored, and I toss the package the guys have lent me on the coffee table--nonchalantly, like I don't need it.

The package is actually a big, brown envelope filled with lyric sheets, guitar tab, cassette tapes. I'm the new singer in the band, these are my new songs. But as soon as I let go of the package, I'm struck with the urge to pick it up again, to cling to the lyrics and the music. I need them. The basement is chilly. I glance down and, yes, sure enough, my nipples are poking through both my bra and my T-shirt. If I hadn't let go of the package, I could clutch it to my chest.

Casually, then, I drop onto the couch, forgetting that the thing is busted in the middle. It collapses--catching me by surprise as my backside hits the cement floor. Oh *shit*, I say, flailing my arms, trying to hoist myself up with my legs. Pat dashes over to help me. He apologizes for the state of the couch. Sorry, he says. We've been talking about getting some new furniture but you know how it is--priorities. We end up blowing our paycheques on more gear.

Oh yeah, says Paul as he plugs his guitar into his amp. If you ever--Paul's amp squeals and cuts him off mid-sentence. I wait for Paul to finish his sentence. He starts randomly turning knobs, the amp squeals louder, he flicks the On/Off switch to Off. If you ever--he flicks the On/Off switch to On and it squeals again. I wait. Paul reaches behind his amp and pulls the power chord right out of the wall. If you ever need gear, says Paul, finally finishing his sentence, let me know. You know, mike, mike stand, XLR cables. Quarter-inch cables, chord adapters. Guitar strings. Whatever. Let me know, I'll pick up whatever you need. He winks.

I don't have to pay sales tax, says Paul. You'd probably never guess by looking at me, but I'm an Indian.

Paul's hair is blond and his eyes are blue. He doesn't look anything like an Indian to me. *I* look more like an Indian than he does.

When my mom married my dad, says Paul, she lost her Indian Status. Just like that. No more treaty rights, kicked off the reservation--the whole nine yards. My dad's white, that's why. Then the government passed a Bill and, poof, like magic, she's an Indian again, my brothers are Indians. I'm an Indian.

Saves us a lot of money in the long run, says Pat.

So Pete is deaf and Paul is an Indian. I look over at Pat who has opened a beer and set it on top of his amp. What's *his* story? I wonder. I'd like to ask--find out something about Pat--but Paul keeps talking. He pulls out his status card from his wallet and holds it up in front of my face. See? says Paul. Treaty Indian. James Bay Cree. You wouldn't *believe* what I can do with this piece of paper. No sales tax, free university, year round hunting and fishing rights. James Bay, Northern Ontario. Quebec Hydro. Ring a bell to you? The reserves up there are filthy rich, just fucking load-*ed*. You're probably used to those skid-row Indians out West in their fucking rusted-out cars and their fucking cardboard shacks. It's different here. Believe me. Moose Factory, Moosonee. I've visited a few times. They are fucking loaded, man.

As Paul talks, I look alternately at my watch and at Pat, waiting for our band leader to get the rehearsal going. Paul talks about the summer he's planning to spend in Moose Factory with his mother's family. He talks about his Great-uncle Frank, a professional goose-hunting guide, and his cousin Vern, who's breaking into the fiddle-music scene, and his Auntie Faye, who won seven thousand dollars not once but twice at bingo. Pat doesn't seem to mind--while he listens to Paul ramble, Pat pulls out a small, plastic bag filled with rolling papers, matches, and some dried herbs that look like parsley. It's not parsley, though. Of course.

Pat hums quietly to himself while he rolls several tight, thin joints. He grins as he smokes the first, inhaling deeply with his eyes closed. Good shit, he says.

Paul and Pete are tuning their guitars now, so our band leader has me all to himself. He offers me a puff. When I shake my head, he says, I got a pipe. A lot of chicks prefer pipes. When I shake my head again, he says, Bong? Knives? I got some hash upstairs. When I shake my head a third time, Pat says, You *really* gotta give it a try. The stuff *relaxes* you, man. Really loosens you up, opens your *mind* to the *music*.

Pat's eyes are getting glassy. I gotta smoke before I play, he says.

I suggest, then, that maybe we ought to get started. I say that maybe we could begin by discussing our song list for the upcoming gig. I want to add a few songs to the list. For Pete's sake, I try to speak clearly and enunciate my words properly. Pat, however, is confused. Grinning, he says, Hey man, is there something wrong with the list?

Paul answers him. No, says Paul. There is absolutely nothing wrong with the list. The list is perfect, I made it up myself. The list stays *as is*.

I explain, then, that I've just noticed there aren't any female artists represented on the list. I direct my comments to Pat--he is the band leader, after all. No female songs, I say. I'm doing all the singing, I say. And *I'm* female. Does this not strike you as odd?

That you're female? say Paul.

Damn it. I walked right into that one. I keep my mouth shut for a moment as I try to come up with a clever and witty remark to match Paul's. *You're a real dick* comes to mind.

We can change the list, says Pete.

We can't change the list, says Paul. Guy songs, girl singer. It's going to be our trademark.

A few girl songs, I say. I'm not suggesting that we change the *whole* list, we could just add a few girl songs. Two or three. Four at the most. I've brought some tapes and lyric sheets with me. They're easy. And I was thinking that if the songs are, you know, too sweet, you guys could put an edge on them--add your own guitar solos. It wouldn't hurt to try, would it?

Pat lights up a second joint, Paul shakes his head. What would it hurt? I ask.

Pat starts walking up the stairs. You guys work this out, he says, I've got to take a piss.

Some band leader. Paul straps on his guitar and starts plucking strings.

I'm a guitar player, says Paul. In this band, in case you haven't noticed, we're all guitar players. We play guitar songs, OK. Paul plays a long lick high on the fretboard. He says, The only chick I can think of who plays guitar is Leona Boyd, OK. And, just for the record, we're not learning any fucking Leona Boyd songs. If you want to do chick songs--bottom line--you're in the wrong band. He cranks up the amp.

Pete calls me over to the other side of the basement. He says, I don't know what Pat told you about us. I mean, don't know what Pat told you about this *gig*. The thing is, it's not really our gig *per se*, we're opening for another band. I guess we'll only be on stage for forty, forty-five minutes--one set. Thirteen or fourteen songs max. Which is a good thing 'cause--I guess--well, I guess I don't need to tell you that without drums and bass nobody's going to want to sit through more than one set by us.

I don't say anything. Paul's guitar twangs in the background. Pete continues.

I know, says Pete, that Pat probably made it look like we're a pretty *together* band. Paul likes to talk tough too. He says he's going to rent a drum machine and some MIDI gear--a bass board or something. The guy's so full of shit. We're all broke. I'm going to school, Pat blows all his money on drugs. And then, even if we could rent the equipment, we don't know the first thing about computer sequencing. The truth is--well, I guess it's pretty obvious. We only know about ten songs. You know, ten complete songs--minus riffs and a few pieces of songs. There's no way we could play a whole night. It's taken us months to get these songs together. *Months.*

I cross my arms over my chest, waiting for Pete to get to the point.

No way could we pull together any new guy songs let alone girl songs. As it is--right now--we don't know a single girl song. I don't think I could name a single girl singer.

Janis Ian? I ask. Pete shakes his head. Joan Baez? He shrugs his shoulders. Jane Siberry? Joan Jett? Joni Mitchell? Sorry, he says.

When Pete fails to recognize Joni Mitchell, I start to suspect that maybe he can't hear properly with Paul's amp whining at full volume. He's got to know Joni Mitchell. It occurs to me that the names I've mentioned all start with J. Maybe he has troubling lip-reading J's. Buffy St. Marie? I ask. Emmie Lou Harris? Melissa Eth-er-idge? I exaggerate my pronunciations.

Pat comes down the stairs saying, All rightee, let's get this show on the road. Paul keeps playing. Pete shrugs his shoulders.

The rehearsal is long. Between songs, there are half-hour breaks during which Pat, Pete, and Paul fiddle with their distortion pedals, playing the same riffs over and over again, trying to find the perfect distortion effects. With three lead guitar players in the band, everyone wants to be a star, everyone wants to play the guitar solo. We take breaks while the guys argue about who will play the solos; we take breaks while they work out their guitar solos. Around midnight, Pat is struck with insatiable hunger. We take breaks while he calls the pizza place, while we watch him wolf down twelve pieces. By three o'clock in the morning, we've taken a dozen breaks and only mastered a handful of songs.

It will be all right, I tell myself, sipping on my bright pink cooler at the end of the night. *The next rehearsal will be better*. Pat, Pete, and Paul are all in a circle, now, passing a joint around. *All great musicians have suffered like this. It's part of being in a group, playing on a team*. When my turn comes, when the joint is passed to me, I lift it to my lips. Then, as though I'm about to jump in a deep pool of water, I take a deep breath. *It's called paying your dues*. The guys all nod, and grin.

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As usual, Simone calls at the end of August--it's a tradition in our house, a sign that school is starting again. We only take piano lessons during the school year, from September until June. Simone calls each of us to ask which days we would prefer to have our piano lessons. She calls her most senior students first, for there is a sort of hierarchy to the days of the week. Beginners have their lessons on Mondays. Senior students have their lessons later in the week. Friday lessons are high status.

For the last two years, Sophie has been Simone's senior-most student--she's had Friday lessons and I've had Thursday lessons. This year, with Sophie off to university, I move into the top spot. I've waited ten years for this day. Fridays--for the first time ever--are mine for the taking.

Simone asks to speak to my mother first; I'm forced to hover around the phone in the kitchen and wait. There are butterflies in my stomach and my palms are sweaty--the thought of talking to Simone makes me nervous. I worry that when it's my turn to talk, I'll stutter and stammer. I adore Simone so much that I'm afraid of her. She is twelve years older than me and she has a gorgeous boyfriend named Jean-Pierre who lives in Toronto and whose picture sits in a silver frame on top of her grand piano. Simone is going to be concert pianist some day. When I'm older I want to be just like her. I want to smell like cinnamon, I want to wear silver rings on my pinkie fingers. I want to play like Simone, with my back straight, my head tilted slightly to the right, my wrists up. I'm growing my hair out to look just like hers--long, straight, no bangs. Someday I want to have a boyfriend in Toronto and put his picture on my piano.

Then, before I have a chance to talk to Simone, Mom hangs up the phone. Simone, she says, is not teaching piano lessons anymore.

I'm too stunned to speak.

Mom continues. Simone called to tell us that she's getting married in Toronto and then moving to Montreal with Jean-Pierre. Isn't that good news for her?

Good news? Oh God. This cannot be happening to me. It's my year for Friday lessons. Simone can't be getting married. Not this year. Not yet. Not now.

My mother doesn't seem to notice the gravity of the situation. Simone is packing her bags and flying away--just like that. She's forgotten me completely. I can see her now, putting all her music books in boxes. Wrapping her brass piano light in newspaper--probably her metronome, too, and her framed picture of Jean-Pierre. Jean-Pierre who, come to think of it, is not so gorgeous after all. Truth be known, he has a receding hairline and a bit of an overbite.

Mom just keeps rattling on. *Cheerfully.* As though nothing has happened--as though nothing at all has changed. Mom says, Simone wants you to take her beginner students. All eight of them. What a compliment to you! What a wonderful opportunity! Good experience and extra spending money. Simone says that you'll make fifty dollars a week. Fifty dollars a week! That's two hundred dollars a month.

On and on Mom talks. She talks about advertising for more piano students in the *St. Paul Journal.* She starts an imaginary schedule for the beginners--four lessons every day after school, twenty students per week--Saturday morning piano recitals in our living room with coffee and doughnuts for the parents. The whole time, she doesn't even ask if I *like* beginners, if I *want* to teach piano lessons.

I guess that's it for me, then, I say to my mother. No more piano lessons for *me*. I was going to have Friday lessons this year. I was going to play my first Rachmaninoff. The tears are rolling down my cheeks now, there's no point in trying to stop them.

Oh no, says Mom, putting her arm around me. I shake her arm away. You're going to play all the Rachmanoff you want, says Mom, mispronouncing the name. Simone has found a new teacher for you--someone well respected and qualified and very, very eager to meet you. She wouldn't leave you without a teacher. Mom rubs my back. It's all been arranged, she says.

Is it Laurette Côté? I ask, sniffling and reaching for a Kleenex. Laurette Côté is one of Simone's former students. She plays the violin and the piano. One of her eyes wanders a little but she's quite pleasant--and an exceptional pianist, though I don't quite understand how she focuses on the keyboard. Mom shakes her head. No, it's not Laurette

Oh Mom, I say, don't tell me it's Jablonski. Please, not him. Pavel Jablonski is my parents' age. Actually, he's *Dr*. Jablonski--he has a Ph.D. in Music. He's the organist at the Catholic church in town and the Director of the Polish Catholic Community Choir and the President of the Polish Catholic Cultural Association. Mom shakes her head again. Good, I say, blowing my nose. I don't think I could stand his Polish nationalism. I smile a little. And, I mean, I'm sure he's a good teacher but he'd probably try to convert me to Catholicism.

So who is it? I ask.

Mom clears her throat. There is a moment of silence. Sister Maria Beaudry, says Mom.

A *nun*?

For weeks, I say no. Mom says that a lot of nuns these days are modern. She says that a lot of them are young; they don't wear habits and they get regular jobs just like other people. Still, I say no. No, I will not take piano lessons from a nun in a convent.

Nuns are creepy. Creepy and mean. What kind of a woman would marry Jesus? A very creepy one. Nuns who are teachers rap their pupils' knuckles with rosaries. It's a well-known fact. They pray constantly--and when they're not praying, they're reading the Bible. They don't talk like normal people. They don't eat normal food. They don't like children let alone teenagers. They have no sense of humor, they hardly laugh. I tell Mom that I wouldn't take piano lessons from Sister Maria if she were the last piano teacher on Earth.

As it happens, however, Sister Maria practically *is* the last piano teacher on Earth. Laurette Côté has all the students she can handle. Dr. Jablonski is on sabbatical this year. Edmonton is two and a half hours away, too far to drive once a week. Too far to drive even once a month, especially when winter comes. By the beginning of October, I'm still without a teacher and desperate for lessons. I tinkle on the piano. I pout. It's becoming clear that I take Sister Maria or nothing. Sister Maria or no one. Sister Maria or give up the piano forever.

Mom drives me to my piano lesson and I sulk all the way. I look down at the books on my lap--books Simone bought for me, books with Simone's notes in them. I don't want to go, I say. Mom says, I know. I miss Simone, I say. Mom says, I know. I'll probably hate Sister Maria, I say. Mom says, If you don't like her you can always quit.

The more Mom agrees with me, the angrier I get. She's being too sympathetic, too *nice*. I want to fight with my mother, I want her to tell me I'm being childish so that I can tell her she doesn't understand anything--it would make me feel better. Instead, she parks the car in front of the convent and says that she's proud of me. I'm really impressed with you, Colleen, she says. You're being very mature about this. I scowl at her; she smiles at me.

Sister Maria meets me at the door of the convent--she stands beside the little plaque on the wall that says *Les Soeurs de l'Assumption*. No smile, no hello. You're Colleen, she says. I'm Maria. She rolls the 'r' in Maria.

Sister Maria is very tall and bone-thin. She's so thin that when I look at her face it's as though I'm looking at a skull. Like a Holocaust victim. On her head, there's just a small patch of white hair--hardly any, in fact. I've never seen a woman with so little hair. And Mom is right, Sister Maria doesn't wear a habit. I almost wish that she did. Her sweater is black and stretched out of shape. Her pants are too big, they hang and sag as though they're about to drop off. Don't they feed them here?

The first thing Sister Maria does when we get to her music room is motion for me to take a seat on the piano bench. Then, while I wait, she rummages around in her cupboard. Is she getting out her Bible? Do we pray before we play?

No one can play music with an empty belly, she says, lifting up a bag of chocolate chip cookies. She pulls a chair next to the piano bench. You want to eat, you eat. I don't like my pupils to go hungry. Sister Maria says 'hongry.'

I'd rather not eat any of Sister Maria's cookies. She needs them much more than I do. But she doesn't help herself to any cookies. Instead she keeps offering, thrusting the cookie bag in my face. Really, she's acting an awful lot like an old *baba*--insisting that I eat, practically forcing food down my throat. Surely, though, she is French. Beaudry is definitely a French name. She has to be French, this is a convent for French Catholic nuns.

I give in, finally. The cookie is rock-hard and stale.

What do you want to play? asks Sister Maria.

I start to open my grade nine Royal Conservatory book to the Chopin Waltz I played for my grade nine piano exam. Actually, I can play it off by heart--the music is just for reassurance. It's my best piece, Simone says I was born to play Chopin. I can really show off with it. But Sister Maria snatches the book from out of my hands and throws it on the floor.

That's for babies, she says, making a sour face. Now tell me, she says. What do you want to *play*?

What do I want to play? I repeat Sister Maria's question. I don't understand her, I don't know what she means. How can I impress her if I don't understand what she is saying? Simone never threw my books around, never made faces. This is it, I think. Sister Beaudry is going to pull out the ruler right now and let me have it across the knuckles. God, this is worse than I'd imagined.

Sister Beaudry looks a little exasperated. What *new* pieces do you want to play? You tell me. It's up to you. I'm not going to choose for you. I don't baby my students. You say Bach, we play Bach. You say Mozart, we play Mozart. But no more grade nine pieces. You're finished with grade nine. *Capice*?

She's Italian! That's it! I try to think of some Italian composers to impress her. Verde? Did Verde write piano music? Puccini. No, he's opera. Palestrina?

Sister Maria snaps her fingers. Come on, come on, she says. Give me a name. One name. Quick, quick. Let's go!

Rachmaninoff!

I say Rachmaninoff in desperation because I can't think of a single Italian composer of piano music. As soon as I say it, I want to take it back. But there it is--Rach-man-in-off--hanging in the air between us, suspended, waiting for Sister Maria's judgment. I don't know how she'll react. Is Rachmaninoff too difficult? Too easy? She is silent for several seconds, then she leans back in her chair and smiles. She actually smiles.

She can't be Russian. There's no such thing as a Russian nun. Is there?

You like Russian music? says Sister Maria.

Russian music? I've never really thought about it but I say, Sure. Yeah. I like Russian music. I like it a lot. Shostakovich, Tchaikovsky. Bartók. I've always liked Russian music. Well. Off course, Bartók is Hungarian not Russian.

I'm rambling now, but there's no turning back.

I say, Well, you know, I like Slavic music in general. Like Stravinsky, Dvorák. The Chopin Mazurkas. All of that. What I've really always wanted to play, though, is music by Ukrainian composers. You know, if there was such a thing. Ukrainian composers, I mean.

Now why did I go and say that? What's wrong with me? Ukrainian composers have never once crossed my mind. Never once. I'm so scared that I'm making things up, saying anything that comes to mind. I hate this Sister Maria, she intimidates me. I don't even know what I'm saying.

Sister Maria gets up, then, pushing me off my seat so that I almost fall to the floor. For such a skinny body, she's very tough.

Hold out your hands, she says.

Here we go, I think. I'm getting it now. The ruler--on the palms of my hands instead of the knuckles. Well, this will be the first and last time she beats me, that's for sure. If she lays a finger on me, I won't come back to this godawful place.

But Sister Maria opens the piano bench and from it she gathers a dozen music books into her arms. So you think there's no such thing as a Ukrainian composer? she says. One by one, she plops music books and sheet music into my hands, reciting composers' names as she goes. Dmytro Bortniansky, Kyrylo Stetsenko, Stanyslav Liudkevych. You know these names? she asks. I shake my head. Lev Revutsky, Borys Liatoshynsky. More books drop into my hands. Mykola Lysenko.

They aren't famous, says Sister Maria. You can't buy their music anywhere. In fact, I had to make these piano arrangements myself.

Then she lists off names and dates; starts to tell life stories. They're not at all romantic, like the lives of other composers--J.S. Bach with his twenty kids, Chopin with his French mistress.

Maksym Berezovsky, says Sister Maria. Committed suicide in the eighteenth century. Artemii Vedel, nineteenth century, spent most of his life in prison for political reasons. Vasyl Barvinsky--sentenced to ten years in a Soviet concentration camp.

It seems like all of the deaths were violent. She talks about composers who were gunned down, murdered, assassinated--composers who starved to death, who froze to death. I don't know what to say. I just didn't realize that there are--that there were--such composers. Ukrainian composers, I mean.

After she has placed the last music book into my arms, Sister Maria drops back into her chair. She looks tired. My mother was Ukrainian, she says, rubbing the little crucifix that hangs around her neck on a silver chain. And an opera singer, of all things. She died in exile, in France.

You go to mass? she asks. I shake my head. Well, she says, taking a deep breath, doesn't matter.

There is silence between us for a moment and then, while I am still standing with the Ukrainian music books in my hands, Sister Maria plays for me. She plays a song in a minor key--slow and melancholy, her arms outstretched like wings over the piano. From time to time, she leans over the piano, her fingers kneading the keys, her forehead almost touching her hands--as though she means to kiss the keys; then she arches her back and tilts her face upward, eyes closed. As she plays, her room starts to look sad to me. The plaster on the walls is cracked and chipping, there is a dented metal filing cabinet in the corner. A yellowed poster of Beethoven hangs crooked by one nail over the piano. Everything is drab and worn. Sister Maria's sleeves brush against the piano--the sleeves are worn, too. Not black so much as grey.

It's getting dark by the time my lesson ends. Mom is waiting for me outside the convent at six o'clock sharp. I come out of Sister Maria's room with gifts from her, a handful of cookies and several brown sheets of music--her piano adaptations of works by Lysenko, Vedel, Revutsky. Before I get into the car, I shove the cookies into my jean jacket pocket. Maybe I'll put them in the bird feeder. I slip the brown sheets under the cover of my grade nine music book. I don't want Mom asking any questions about my lesson. I decide that what goes on inside the convent is private, it's between Sister Maria and me.

So, says Mom. Should we call it quits with Mother Superior? She laughs at her own joke. Or is she a *nice* nun, like Julie Andrews in the *Sound of Music*? I hardly hear Mom's questions, I'm staring through the car window and into Sister Maria's window--trying to catch a glimpse of her as we drive away. I wonder how Sister Maria found her way here, to St. Paul, Alberta. I wonder how she lives here with no one to hear and appreciate her talent. Maybe she died long ago in this--her own--exile.

I tell myself that I'll become Sister Maria's best pupil. I'll practice hard, every day without fail. I'll bake cookies before my lessons and bring her Tupperware containers full of them--fresh cookies, still warm. Maybe at Easter, I'll make a *pysanka* for Sister

Maria--a religious one, with pussy willows and crosses. Mom sings as she pulls away from the convent--*the hills are alive with the sound of music*--then she reaches over to squeeze my hand.

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On the day of the gig, the guys arrange to pick me up at seven o'clock. Our set starts at nine o'clock sharp so we'll have almost two hours to unpack the gear, set up the gear, and do a sound check. The guys from the other band, the band that we're opening for--Six-man Gothic Jam--have agreed to let us to use their equipment. They have lights, speakers, mikes, a sound board, and their very own sound man. All Pat and Pete and Paul have to bring are their amps and guitars. According to Paul, it's a good deal. Of course it's a good deal. Amps and guitars are the only gear Pat and Pete and Paul own.

The van--Paul's--pulls up in front of my place at a quarter past eight. I've been sitting on the curb waiting for almost an hour when I hear it approaching--muffler popping, music blaring. The van is dark brown with big fat wheels; its windows are tinted black, on its side there is a painting of an orange and red sunset. I half expect to see fuzzy dice dangling from the rearview mirror, but when I get in, I see the guys have hung there instead a Playboy bunny air freshener. The three of them grin at me, their eyes half-closed and glassy. I cough as I try to find a place among the amps and the guitar cases. The smell of pot is nearly bowling me over.

As we make our way to the bar--The Cabana Room--I count eight speakers around the interior of the van. We're listening to Bob Marley and the Wailers. I try several times to start a conversation before I finally give up. Pat is hunched over, absorbed in the rolling of dope. Paul is driving and singing along--and also controlling the volume of the stereo. He turns down the music only when he has something to say. Each time Paul changes the volume of the stereo, Pete lifts his hands to his ears, adjusting the volume of his hearing aids.

Halfway through "Redemption Song"--which I'm half-enjoying, despite the volume--Paul pops the eight track right out of the deck. Colleen, he says, listen up. I want to introduce you to *Ras Tafaaaari.* Then he starts an impromptu lecture on reggae music, Haile Selassie, and Ethiopia.

As Paul pulls the van in front of The Cabana Room, he tells me to jump out. Go on inside, he says. Order us a round of beer--whatever's on tap. Pete says, A side of clam for me. Pat says, See what's on the menu. I'm getting the munchies.

I don't say anything, I pretend I haven't heard.

A round of beer, says Paul. Do you want me to spell it out?

No, thank you, I say. I'm not retarded. I just thought maybe we'd take it easy tonight. You know. Since it *is* our first gig. We don't want to be passing out halfway through the set.

One round of beer won't hurt, says Pete.

But I know that all of the guys have been smoking, that none of the guys can stop after one beer. I know what they--what *we*--sound like after a few rounds. So I try a different strategy. I suggest that we haul our gear into the bar first. Maybe the gear will take their minds off the beer.

Yeah, says Paul. *We're* hauling gear, *you're* getting beer. You can't lift any of this shit, might as well make yourself useful.

The amps aren't that heavy, I say.

Go get the beer, says Paul.

I can carry the guitars.

Go get the beer.

I could hold the doors open for you guys.

Get the *fucking* beer, says Paul.

Get it yourself, I say. I'm not your fucking servant girl.

Paul ignores me. He parks the van almost three feet away from the curb in front of The Cabana Room. I wait for Pat or Pete to suggest that Paul move the van closer to the curb. I think for a moment that I ought to say something--Paul, listen up, I want to introduce you to the *curb*. But I let the moment pass--I just let it go, let it slip away. The thought of Paul's van being ticketed or towed or--better yet--being rammed by a passing vehicle fills me with immense pleasure. Maybe a big semi will roar by and scrape away the whole side, sunset and all.

Inside The Cabana Room, some of the guys from Six-man Gothic Jam are seated around a table, drinking coffee and discussing their song list--others are testing mikes and setting lights. They look thirty-ish, experienced, organized. They look sober. Their equipment looks flashy and new. I count twenty-four channels on their sound board. On five matching black guitar stands are five guitars--two electrics, one six-string acoustic, one twelve-string acoustic, and a four-stringed black beauty. A bass. The drummer's kit--six toms, six crash cymbals--is all black with shiny, gold trim. On the front of his bass drum, SGJ is written in glittery gold lettering.

Six-man's sound man, Mike, introduces himself to us. Paul makes a few wisecracks--he asks how Mike feels being the seventh man, then he asks if Mike is short for 'microphone'.

Mike doesn't laugh. He says that he's been waiting almost two fucking hours for us and that he'd like to do a sound check in five. You the singer? says Mike, turning to me. I nod. He says, Shur 57, Shur 58, EV--what's your pleasure?

Though I'm not sure what he's asking me, there isn't time to dwell on the question. EV, I blurt out. EV's just fine.

I should've known, he says, all you chicks dig the same fucking mike.

Mike says that while the guys are tuning their guitars, he'll ring out my mike, set my monitor levels, then pipe me through the mains.

I know a thing or two about sound checks. I know that I'll have to say *check check* a couple of times and then sing a bit of a song while he adjusts the knobs on his sound board. I'm ready to go with a gutsy Nazareth tune as soon as Mike says the word. While he fiddles with the sound board, I say *test 1-2, check 1-2*. Mike tells me to hang on. I hang on. A few seconds later, he says, OK.

Test 1-2, I say, *test 1-2. Check check. Mike check 1-2.*

One more time, says Mike.

Check 1-2. Test 1-2.

I'm about to sing into the microphone when Mike tells me that he's all done. He's finished with me. I can get off the stage now.

But when do I sing? I ask.

No need, says Mike. Your sound check is done.

Well, shouldn't I sing *something*? I ask again. A few bars of something? I mean, just to make sure that my voice comes through? Over the guitars, I mean. Maybe you should check my voice in relation to the guitars, so that I'm not overpowered.

Look, says Mike. If you really want to sing, then sing. Go ahead. Don't let me stop you. You want to sing for me--sing for me. Sing your fucking heart out. But don't tell me how to do my fucking job, OK? Your sound check is *done*.

I feel my face burning. The guys from Blue Lotus stop tuning their guitars. Even Paul looks surprised.

The guitar sound checks take longer--five, ten minutes maybe. Mike puts on his jacket while he sets their guitar levels; the guys from Six-man Gothic Jam leave before he's finished. On his way out the door, Mike warns us not to touch anything. Don't touch the board, don't touch the lights, don't touch the drum kit. We look like four little kids getting scolded. Don't touch the levels on your amps, don't touch the volume knobs on your guitars. And don't think I won't know if you mess with our gear. I'll be back at eleven, Six-man Gothic Jam will be back at eleven. Just don't touch a fucking thing while we're gone.

At ten to nine, The Cabana Room is almost completely empty--the bartender and one waitress are smoking and playing cards at the bar. We're getting a percentage of the money made at the door, so our wages depend on the crowd. The guys say that they've told a lot of their Scarborough friends about the gig. It's still early, says Pat, they'll be here. We all nod, though I'm not sure that any of us believe him.

We've planned to start with "Takin' Care of Business," then an Aerosmith medley and our version of "Brown-Eyed Girl" with heavy distortion guitar. We've decided to take only short breaks between songs--to keep the crowd going. I'm supposed to say brief, witty things to the audience. After "Takin' Care of Business," I say, *And now we've got some Aerosmith business to take care of*! The crowd is supposed to go crazy. While Paul plays the introduction to "Brown-Eyed Girl," I say, *We're going to do something a little different with this next song*! Then, instead of singing, *You're my brown-eyed girl*, I sing, *I'm your brown-eyed girl*. The audience is supposed to go wild.

The problem is, we have no audience. Without consulting the guys, I make an on-the-spot decision to drop all of my witty song-introductions. The guys don't seem to notice. They take long breaks between songs to order--and drink--shots of Jack Daniels, and tequila. I watch them licking salt from their hands, sucking on wedges of lemon. Pat obsessively tunes and re-tunes his guitar. Paul ignores--or forgets--the order of songs that we've settled on, opting, instead, to play whatever tune comes to his head. Midway through the set, Pete starts to sway. Wrong notes, wrong chords, wrong riffs pierce through the sound system. The guys crank up the distortion on their guitars, playing solos that are twice--three times--longer than they should be. It's as though we've never rehearsed.

I keep my eye on the door of the bar, hoping for an audience to appear. Get used to the idea, I tell myself, that we are not making any money tonight. We are not making money. My mind wanders. We are not making money, therefore I am not paying rent. Therefore at the end of the month, I'm moving into a cheaper place. My gutsy Nazareth tune comes up and I sing it with no guts at all.

Just as we finish our most uninspired rendition yet of "We're Here For a Good Time," I'm jolted back to reality. In walk three guys and a girl. The seedlings of a crowd. I feel my spirits lift immediately as our audience finds a place at a table near the back of the bar. Friends of yours? I ask Pat. He shakes his head. Paul plays a long riff on his guitar--Build a good band, he says, and they will come! He's excited, too.

Without asking, Paul grabs my microphone out of its stand. He starts talking to our audience like a used car salesman. Howdy folks, he says, slurring his words. Welcome, welcome. Glad to have you here at The Cabana Room on this balmy November eve.

The girl gives him a little wave; the three guys don't look remotely enthusiastic. Paul continues.

To thank you for coming out tonight, he says, we're going to do a personalized performance for you--something we like to do now and then for our devoted fans.

Oh God, I think, please stop. Pat, Pete, somebody--stop him.

If you want to give us your song requests, says Paul, we'll do our best to play them. In the meantime, grab yourselves a drink, sit back and enjoy.

There is an awkward silence in the bar. Under my breath, I hiss, You're such a idiot.

Pardon me? says Paul, trying hard to focus on my face.

Before I have a chance to repeat myself, one of the guys in the crowd says, I thought Six-man was playing tonight. From across the bar, the waitress yells, They're on at eleven. One by one, the three guys and the girl file out of The Cabana Room.

Just after ten o'clock, I step off the stage. The guys want to keep playing until eleven, but I tell them that I've had enough. We're wasting our time. This isn't a gig, this is a joke. As I head toward the bar for a cup of coffee, I hear Paul slurring on stage--the mike picks up his voice. He says that the fucking little bitch is out, that they don't need this fucking bullshit. Fucking little bitch, fucking bullshit, fucking slut. When I hear the word "cunt," I flinch a little. The waitress offers me a cigarette.

He your old man? she says.

Oh God, no, I say. I hardly know the guy--it's my first gig with them. Probably my last by the sounds of things.

The waitress plops herself down next to me with her own cup of coffee, smoking her own cigarette. Her hair is blond with dark roots, her lipstick is bleeding into the skin around her lips. Janie, she says, shaking my hand. I'm about to ask about her accent when she says, Don't mind the accent. I grew up on the North Shore. I always tells people that--I tell them straight away. Saves the hassle of them asking if I'm a Newfie and me getting mad as hell and all that. She inhales deeply on her cigarette. No offense or anything, she says, but you don't need to take this shit. She points to Paul. Take it from me. I learned my lesson early--don't take no shit from no one. I left home when I was fifteen, she says. My mom married this prick--asshole tried to get in my pants the night he moved in. Fuck that shit. The next morning I emptied his wallet, bought a one-way ticket out.

Wow, I say.

Seven years later, she says, and I never once looked back. I mean, don't get me wrong or anything, it's your life--none of my business. But as soon as you walked in here I thought, now what's she doing with this bunch of losers? Then I heard you sing and I thought, well now, this girl can really sing. I'm not a singer myself but I come from a musical family plus I dated a sax player once so I know a thing or two about it and I told Dave--Janie points to the bartender--I told him, this girl's got one hell of a voice. I said that. Didn't I say that, Dave?

Dave nods.

Janie says, One *hell* of a voice, but singing this *shit* music in this *shit* bar? You've got it all wrong. Not that I'm an expert or anything, because I'm not. But it's pretty obvious you're not cut out for this scene.

What about the other band? I say. Why are they doing this gig if it's so shitty? They seem to know what they're doing. They look like real pros.

Six-man? says Janie, exhaling smoke into my face. They're pros all right. On the road forty, forty-five weeks a year--out West mostly. Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta. Maybe BC. Do they play in BC? says Janie to Dave.

Dave nods.

They make a *killing*, says Janie. Country and western is really big out there--that's all they play. Here they call themselves Six-man Gothic Jam; on the road they're Six Gun Justice. Pretty smart. The drummer just uses the same sign on his kick. Anyway, Eddie--he's the bass player--well, his uncle owns this place and the guys do him a favour and play here whenever they're in the city. I'm thinking of going out West myself, tons of work out there.

Hey! says Janie, as though struck with a revelation. *That's* what you should be singing. Country and western. Out West. Your voice is perfect for it! You should talk to the guys from Six-man, see what they say. Ask them what it's like out there.

I lift the coffee cup to my lips, nodding. In fact, I want to shake my head. I want to tell Janie that she's wrong. There is nothing out West for me, nothing for musicians. Toronto is the place to be, definitely Toronto. That's why I came here.

I can introduce you to Six-man, says Janie. Maybe they'll let you do a song or two with them. I don't know if they're really looking for a female singer but it's worth a try--maybe they could set you up with another band that's heading out West, a band that *is* looking for a singer.

Janie is beaming. What do you think? she says.

Sounds pretty cool, I say, butting out my cigarette. But I should really get going.

You want another coffee? says Janie, lifting up my coffee cup. Dave! Fill 'er up! Stick around, keep me company, listen to Six-man.

No, really, I say. I should go. I don't want to deal with--you know--the guys.

As I point toward the stage, Janie shrugs; as I walk out the door of The Cabana Room, Janie says, Nice meeting you.

Hey! she calls out after me. I never caught your name! Where are you from?

I pretend that I haven't heard her. Where am I from?

Janie, you'd never guess.

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The long weekend before school starts is Rodeo Weekend. LRA Finals. Lakeland Rodeo Association. The whole town gets in the rodeo spirit--cowboy murals on store-front windows, hay bales in the grocery stores. DJ's from CFCW blare country music "on-location" in video stores and gas stations. Bank tellers and drugstore cashiers wear blue jeans and plaid shirts, the mayor wears a ten-gallon hat and a sheriff's badge. There are pancake breakfasts at the Co-Op Mall, a parade down main street, and a beerfest on Saturday night at the Rec. Centre.

Nobody actually goes to the rodeo--nobody I know, at least. There are the guys--and some girls--from school who wait all year for the LRA Finals. They're the 4-H crowd, the farm kids. The *real* farm kids, the ones who wear Wrangler jeans and big shiny buckles the size of dinner plates. They raise steers and heifers like pets, feeding them by hand and brushing them. I've heard that on auction day the girls--and some guys--cry when their cows are sold. We're not real farm kids. On our farm, Dad grows a few acres of wheat and lets the neighbours' horses graze in our hay field. We have two cats and a dog. We don't go to the rodeo.

This year, though--for the first time--we're going to the rodeo beerfest. Tanya Yuzko, Kirsten Paulichuk and me. At least we're going to *try* going--none of us is actually old enough to get in. Tanya and Kirsten are sixteen, I'm fifteen. And the beerfest--like nearly every event in St. Paul that remotely promises to be a good time--is off-limits to minors.

Up until two years ago, getting into a beerfest was no big deal. A few weeks prior to rodeo weekend, Sophie would get Mom or Dad to pick up advance beerfest tickets. Tickets in hand, Sophie and her friends would breeze through the doors of the Rec. Centre, get their hands stamped, make their way to the bar. No questions asked, simple as that. Then Tina Lafortune and Brenda McGonigal at the tender ages of fourteen and fourteen-and-a-half respectively got caught puking straight vodka in the ladies' room of the Rec. Centre. The cops drove Brenda to Emergency to have her stomach pumped, then hauled Tina home in the back of a squad car. The Ag Society was fined a thousand dollars--five hundred a head--and the police shut down the beerfest altogether.

Tanya's brilliant idea is that we put our hair up, wear high heels; that we plaster on the make-up. I say that this will make us look cheaper not older, but Tanya insists that we try. So, a week before the beerfest, we meet at her place for a trial run. Tanya's got hot rollers, a crimper, and an electric nail dryer. Kirsten brings samples of her mom's Amway facial soaps, cleansers, and moisturizers plus her mom's Mary Kay make-up kit, complete with eighteen different shades of blushes, eyeshadows, and lipsticks. I don't wear much make-up and I keep my nails as short as possible for piano lessons, but I have all the latest and best gels, mousses, sprays, and spritzes--for my bangs, which I curl and back-comb into a brittle little ball across my forehead. To Tanya's place I bring my arsenal of hair products.

Tarts. When all is said and done, we look like tarts. We've got three identical hairdos--all crimped and teased and rigid with miscellaneous chemicals. My face feels itchy and greasy from all of Kirsten's lotions and creams; my eyelids stick together when I blink--too much Mary Kay mascara. I've gone with a mature look--pale powder and deep red lipstick, "Potent Poppy"; Tanya's done her face in shades of pale purple--lavender eyeshadow, lilac blush, mauve lipstick. I look like a vampire, she looks like she's got hypothermia. Yolande Yuzko suggests that we all use subtler shades--careful with pink, she says, or you'll look like an albino. Which Kirsten takes personally because she's used bright pink eyeshadow, dark pink eyeliner, light pink blush, and neon pink lipliner and lipstick.

Girls, I say, as we huddle together around the bathroom sink, scrubbing our faces with face-cloths, cotton pads and cotton balls. Girls, I say, this is not the way.

We brainstorm in Tanya's bedroom--Kirsten on the floor beside the bed, recording all of our ideas on a pad of paper; Tanya and I on the bed beside the open window, chain-smoking six of her dad's cigarettes.

Fake I.D. for you two, I say. You've each got a driver's license, I think it's your best chance. All you have to do is change your birthdays.

Not without you, says Tanya, we're in this together--all or none.

This, I say, is not the time to be noble. Listen, you two get in, you get your hands stamped--I wait outside with felt pens. You guys meet me at the back door, we draw a stamp on my hand, and I'm in. Piece of cake.

No way, says Kirsten. It's too risky. They'll have Ag people posted at every entrance.

OK, I say. Plan B. Who do we know in the Ag Society? Think girls, think! Uncles, aunties--family friends, old boyfriends.

Kirsten! says Tanya. You dated that 4-H guy--what was his name? Walter, Warren?

Wayne, says Kirsten. But forget about him. The guy's in Honduras or Guatamala or something. On an agricultural exchange.

There's Mr. Demkiw, says Tanya. He kind of knows us all from Ukrainian dancing, he might let us in.

You want to ask him? I ask. Tanya shakes her head.

Count me out, says Kirsten, he's such a prick.

Carla Senko's *gido* is in the Ag Society, I say. Maybe if we talked to Carla and if Carla talked to him--

Tanya blows smoke out the window, Kirsten doodles on a corner of her paper. I don't finish my sentence, and neither Tanya nor Kirsten finishes it for me. We're all quiet for a moment. All right, I say, finally. That was stupid and low. I admit. Scratch it from the record. Pretend I never said it.

Rumours have been going around for months now. The first time Carla ran away from home, everyone said that she was acting out because her parents were too strict; the second time, they said that she was going to live with her boyfriend in Edmonton. The third time, it came out that Carla was staying at the Crisis Centre in town--that she was scheduled for court appearances, that her parents kicked her out for pressing charges against her grandfather. It wasn't rumour anymore, it was real. Kirsten's Mom works at the courthouse. Mr. and Mrs. Senko made Carla drop the charges, then moved her back home.

With no other viable alternatives, we go back to Plan A. Make-up, heels, and hair. Pink, purple, and "Potent Poppy." We cross our fingers and hope for the best--that no R.C.M.P. officers will be circling the Rec. Centre, that no Ag Society members will ask to see our I.D. We vow to stick together, through thick or thin. If one of us gets picked up by the police, we all go to the station. If one of us is denied admission to the beerfest, we all go home together. To relax before the beerfest, we each drink two tequila shooters--compliments of Kirsten's dad's liquor cabinet.

To our first beerfest, says Tanya, lifting her glass.

To *getting into* our first beerfest, says Kirsten.

To getting *drunk* at our first beerfest, I say. *Dai Bozhe*!

It happens so quickly, we hardly know what's hit us. We cross the threshold of the Rec. Centre, ask for three tickets, hand over our thirty bucks--and we're in. An older woman dressed in tight-fitting blue jeans, a sequined red western shirt, and bright red high-heeled cowboy boots is stamping hands. It looks like her jeans have been stretched to their limit over her thighs and her belly--if she takes a deep breath or moves too fast, the seams will burst.

The Lady in Red stamps Tanya's hand, then Kirsten's--*St. Paul and District Ag Society* in bright green ink. Within seconds, Tanya and Kirsten are pulling off their jackets and standing in line to buy liquor tickets. Then, as I hold out my right hand for it to be stamped--for it to be marked with that bright green ticket to freedom--the Lady in Red hesitates. She pauses just as her rubber stamp is about to descend on my hand.

You eighteen? she says.

Of course, I say. Tanya and Kirsten watch from the liquor-ticket line.

You want to show me some proof? says the Lady in Red, putting her rubber stamp and ink pad down, then holding out her hand for my I.D. Her hand is fat; she's got rings on every chubby finger.

They let me in at the door, I say.

They let *everyone* in at the door, says the Lady in Red. It's *my* job to weed out the ones who don't belong.

So I have no choice. I hand her my learner's license and then I hold my breath. I'm done for. The license says "LEARNER'S" across the top in capital letters. It has my birth date on the front and back in bold print. Tanya mouths the word *Shit*, Kirsten starts putting her jacket back on. You fat fucking bitch, I think. Like *you* were never young once, you power-tripping old bat.

The Lady in Red looks at one side of my license for several seconds. She turns it around, turns it back again. Then she stretches her arm out as far as she can--staring, squinting. As though she is *willing* her eyes to focus on the birthdate.

Thank you, she says, handing back my license and smiling. Gotta double check, you know. Have a good time!

So we're in. In, in, *in*! Kirsten, Tanya and I line up at the liquor ticket table. We're only buying two tickets each, as we're sure that guys will be buying us drinks all night. In front of us are Scott Hendricks and Stephen Richer--who went to school with Sophie and Tammy but stuck around St. Paul after graduation. Scott works at the John Deere dealership in town, Stephen works at the Auction Mart.

Brought your picks and shovels? says Stephen into my ear. I sniff the air, wiggling my nose and wincing.

You smell cow shit, Tanya? I say. These farm boys should really learn to wash before they come to town.

Scott gives me the finger. Tanya gives me a high five.

Ron Stranadka is behind the bar, taking liquor tickets and handing out plastic glasses, each filled with an ounce of rye, rum, or vodka. Kirsten asks for vodka, Tammy asks for rye. When my turn comes, I ask for rum. Ron looks at me suspiciously--he plays Old-Timer hockey with Dad. He's going to refuse to serve me, I know it. He's going to ask if I'm that Lutzak girl, if I'm old enough to be here. If Dad knows that I'm going to beerfests underage. What will I say? I'll lie. I'll say that I'm Sophie, the older Lutzak girl. Or I'll say, Lutzak? You must have me confused with somebody else.

Ron says, Dark rum or light?

Dark, I say. Please.

Bless you, Ron, bless you. I will never laugh at your crappy stick-handling again.

The crowd is a mixture of familiar faces and people we've never seen before. Kirsten, Tammy and I find a spot at an empty table near the dance floor between a bunch of Junior B Canadiens--Andy Kostiniuk, Rob Lashinski, Bobby McTavish, that crowd--and a group of bonafide cowboys. The hockey players are already drunk, they're loud and rowdy. Their table is covered with empty beer bottles; some of them are drinking straight rye. All of them are smoking Colts. The cowboy table is quiet. It's hard to see their faces under their cowboy hats but a few of them appear to be chewing snuff and spitting yellowish-brown saliva into plastic cups.

As Tanya lights up two cigarettes--one for me, one for her--one of the hockey players, Andy Kostiniuk, approaches Kirsten. Tanya and I smoke three cigarettes in a row while we watch Kirsten and Andy dance.

Then Tanya is whisked onto the dance floor by one of the other Junior B's, Mike Brodziak, and I'm left alone at our table. Tanya and Mike dance for the duration of my drink. I get a second drink--rum and coke again, best not to mix--and I sip it slowly, trying to make it last. Some guy is bound to buy me a drink soon. After Tanya and Mike finish their dance, they walk over to the Junior B table where he passes her a full bottle of beer. Andy puts his arm around Kirsten as they make their way to the bar, talking and laughing.

I finish my second drink. I wait. How long do I hold out before I buy myself more liquor tickets? This isn't fun at all. This is ridiculous.

On my way to the bar for my third drink, I think that I catch someone looking at me. An older man--an *experienced* man--tall, trim. I would say that he's thirty, thirty-five. His is one of the faces I've never seen before. On my way back to our table, third drink in hand, I'm sure of it: I'm *sure* that he's looking at me. He's a rodeo contestant, obviously. A real cowboy. Maybe he's a bull-rider. His face is tanned leathery-brown; his boots look old and scuffed. He wears Wranglers, snug and well-worn--there are faded creases in the denim around his crotch. Very manly. Black cowboy hat, and no wedding band.

Probably when he asks me to dance, there will be no words exchanged. He'll just take me by the hand and lead me to the dance floor. There will be a couple of up-beat songs first, a couple of driving two-steps. He'll smell like soap and he'll have immaculate rhythm--most cowboys do. Then the band will play a slower song. Maybe George Strait, "Amarillo By Morning." At first, the cowboy will keep a gentlemanly distance--but midway through the song, he'll pull me close and sing along with the band in my ear. Hard to say whether he'll kiss me right on the dance floor or afterwards, in his pickup. I wonder if he pulls a horse trailer. I wonder if he drawls.

My cowboy takes a swig of his beer. Adjusts his hat. Starts walking slowly--nonchalantly--across the Rec. Centre floor. Towards me, unmistakably. His legs aren't nearly as bowed as the legs of the other cowboys. As my cowboy gets closer, I butt out my cigarette. Closer--I down my drink for courage. Closer. He tips his hat. At me.

And then I feel a tap on my shoulder. I hear a familiar voice saying, Hi C'lleen. Wanna dance? You look kinda lonely sitting here all by yourself. My cowboy veers left, heads toward the bar. The band starts "Amarillo By Morning"--of all the songs to play, *"Amarillo By Morning"*--and I'm stuck in the sweaty clutches of Henry Kotowich. Henry Kotowich, my old Ukrainian dancing partner. Henry with chubby, chipmunk cheeks and a bowl haircut and clusters of pimples around his nostrils.

Henry, as it turns out, has a hundred things to tell me and we end up dancing to four songs in a row. Did I know that he's quitting Ukrainian dancing so that he can try out for the high school football team? Did I know that Brad Trachuk and Jodie Sosnowski are going out? Did I hear about the whole mess with Carla Senko and her *gido*? I nod miserably, trying over Henry's shoulder to spot my cowboy in the crowd--and losing him in a set of cowboy hats by the bar.

Did I know that Henry's older brother Glen is playing drums with the band on stage? Did I know that they're thinking about touring around? On and on Henry talks, hardly stopping to breathe. With all the talking he's doing, it's a wonder he doesn't miss a step or slip out of time. But Henry is an incredible dancer, I'll give him that. A gifted dancer.

They go by the name of Jerry Garwasiuk and Sons, says Henry as we lean against a wall listening to the band. Though the old man doesn't play anymore, just the Garwasiuk boys. No market for old time Ukrainian music. No one wants to hear fiddles and *tsymbaly* anymore. It's all top-40 Country and Rock 'n' Roll. That's Kevin Garwasiuk on lead guitar, says Henry, pointing to the lead singer of the band. George

Garwasiuk plays rhythm, he's the youngest. Nice guy that George. Real people-person. Martin Garwasiuk's the bass player, says Henry. Glen says he's a real perfectionist. Kind of a control freak. Hard to work with. And, of course, there's Glen behind the drum kit. Hell of a good drummer, isn't he? Henry looks proud of his brother.

I'm ready to ditch Henry now. Enough is *enough*. If he hangs around me any longer, my chances of meeting *any* guy--let alone my cowboy--will be ruined. I tell Henry that I've got to get a drink. He says that he'll get one for me. I tell him that I need some air so I'm going to take a little walk. He says that he'll walk with me. I tell him that I need to go to the washroom. He says, Me too. *Jesus* Henry, I say. If I didn't know better I'd think that you were trying to come on to me.

Henry looks uncomfortable. He shifts his weight from one leg to the other--he might even be blushing. Henry, I say, are you blushing? Out of the blue, Henry tries to kiss me, pulling me awkwardly towards him and tilting his head to the side--like in the movies. Now would be the time for my cowboy to appear out of nowhere, knock Henry out in one blow, then lift my chin--tenderly--and ask if I'm all right. No cowboy appears. Henry's breath stinks of garlic. I whack him across the head with my open hand.

I look for Kirsten and Tanya at our table, by the bar, in the foyer of the Rec. Centre. They're nowhere to be found. Into the ladies' washroom I go, sure to find them reapplying lipstick or fixing their hair--or both. What am I going to say when I find them? That I'm not feeling well, that I'm tired. That since no *remotely* cool guy has shown the *remotest* bit of interest in me, I'm going *home*. Henry Kotowich. Of all people. Henry Kotowich. Likes *me*. It's definitely time to go.

I peek under the door of each stall in the ladies' washroom, looking for either Tanya's or Kirsten's legs. I call out their names. At first, there is no reply. But then, a voice from within one of the stalls starts to mimic me. *Tan-ya. Kiiiirs-ten.* Carla Senko emerges from the corner stall, hair tousled, mascara smudged under her eyes. She stands beside the washroom sinks with her hands on her hips. Colleen Loose-sack, she says, slurring her words. Long time no see.

Carla is thin. Thinner than the last time I saw her, two months ago, when school let out. There are dark circles under her eyes, her cheeks are sunken. And she's pale--no tan, though it's the end of summer. There is a long brown stain down the front of her shirt where she's spilled a drink.

Carla, I say.

I don't know what else to say. Carla and I aren't exactly the best of friends. In fact, since the incident with the French project--two, three years ago?--we've hardly spoken to each other. Face-to-face with her here, in the bathroom, all I can think about are the rumors about her *gido*. She looks terrible. The rumors must be true.

How are you? I ask.

Fucking pissed, says Carla, trying to wipe off the mascara under her eyes. I'm fucked right up.

It sounds like *fugged* up. *Fugged* right up. And while Carla talks, she sways--nearly falling over, once. I reach out to grab her arm, keep her from hurting herself, but she shakes my hand away. She says, Get the *fug* away from me! As I leave the washroom, I can hear Carla talking to herself--about me, I think. Fucking princess, she says. *Fugging priss-ess.*

Henry is waiting for me outside the ladies' washroom but I charge past him, pretending not to hear him as he calls out my name. I need to find Tanya or Kirsten. Henry runs after me. Colleen, he says, Colleen! He grabs my arm. I'm sorry, Colleen. Listen, I'm really sorry, I was way out of line. I'm sorry.

It's OK, Henry, I say, yanking my arm away from him. Really, it's *OK*, it's fine. I've already forgotten about it.

I start walking swiftly toward the doors of the Rec. Centre. Maybe Tanya and Kirsten are outside. Maybe they're necking with their hockey players in the parking lot.

Wait, says Henry. Wait! Listen, Colleen. I've talked to the guys, I've arranged for you to sing a song with them. Up on stage. You and the band. It's your big chance to sing for a big crowd.

I stop dead in my tracks.

Are you *nuts*, Henry? I bark the words at him. I can't get on stage. I can't attract attention to myself like that, I'm underage here. Have you lost your mind?

Henry looks devastated. I thought you'd like it, he says. I thought it would be like a dream come--

We're going to take a little break, but don't you go anywhere. When we come back we're going to have local celebrity, songstress Colleen Lutzak on stage!

As Kevin Garwasiuk, the band leader, speaks into the microphone, Henry pulls me by the arm across the dance floor, toward the stage. Just *one* song, says Henry. Come on. You've got to do it. They're *asking* for you.

Colleen? Colleen Lutzak! Let's get you up here!

I don't think this is a very good idea, I say to Kevin as we shake hands on the side of the stage. I've mostly been singing at weddings and funerals, Ukrainian songs. Nothing the crowd could dance to, nothing--you know--up-beat.

Not a problem, says Martin, the bass player. We can do a Ukrainian song or two, and we're about due for a slow song anyway. What you got?

My mind goes blank. I can't think of a single song I know--fast or slow.

George suggests *Kazala meni maty*, but I don't know all the words. He says that *Oi divchyno* could make for a good waltz. I've never heard of it. He says that *Balamut* is an old standard, everyone knows *Balamut*.

Kevin shakes his head at George's last suggestion. Too many chord changes in the chorus, says Kevin, we couldn't do it without a proper rehearsal. Don't you know any Country? Kevin asks, turning to me. Tanya Tucker, Chrystal Gail. Anne Murray. The kind of stuff they play on CFCW?

I listen to CBC. They don't play Country music on CBC Radio.

When I tell the band members that I know a few Johnny Cash tunes, the guys all laugh--though I'm not joking. And a couple of Merle Haggard songs, I say.

Has to be a *girl*-song, says Kevin. The other guys in the band nod in unison.

By now, I'm ready to give up. Henry is grinning at me from across the dance floor, as though he's single-handedly made all my dreams come true. Tanya and Kirsten, for all I know, are having sex with their respective hockey players. I thank the band for trying. I say, Well, maybe another time--

How about the Judds? says George Garwasiuk, interrupting me. "Why Not Me" or--what's that other tune of theirs?

"Rockin' to the Rhythm of the Rain," says Martin. That's a good tune. You know that one? he asks.

As it happens, I've just sung a Judds song at Uncle-Charlie's 65th birthday party in Two Hills--not "Why Not Me" or "Rockin' to the Rhythm of the Rain," but a Judds song nonetheless. I give them the song title, they can play it. At last, a song that we all know.

We take a minute or two to go over the order of verses and refrains. Kevin unplugs his guitar and we all cluster around him while he runs through the song. He's playing in E, I notice. I sing the song in A.

I don't mean to be difficult, I say, but actually I'd prefer to do the song in the key of A if it's not too much trouble.

The Judds do it in E, says Kevin.

Well, I say, the Judds have higher voices than I do. *Way* higher voices. To sing their stuff I sort of *have* to key down. It's just three chords anyway--four, I guess, if you throw the minor into the refrain.

I take a second to transpose in my head.

A, D, and E, I say. Those are the chords. Simple I, IV, V structure. And then a quick b minor--ii--at the end of the refrain, if you want.

The guys all frown. Who would think that one minor chord would bring about such long faces?

Of course, I say, we *could* drop the minor chord altogether. That would simplify things. It's really up to you. Doesn't matter to me. You decide.

In fact, I know that the minor chord is crucial--take it out and the whole poignancy of the song goes with it. But I'm willing to compromise just to get this show on the road. It feels as though we've been negotiating for half an hour at least.

We can do it in A, says Kevin. Sure. I have no problem with A. Problem *is*, if we do the song in A then we've got to scrap the riff that comes at the beginning and at the end and between all the verses. *This* riff, says Kevin, playing it in E. You can only play the riff in E, it doesn't work in A. Only a guitar player would know that, of course. He smiles. A little piece of insider-information.

May I? I say, snatching Kevin's guitar out of his hands. To play the riff in A, I say, you just have to be creative. It gives your fingers a little work-out, but it *can* be done.

I play the riff in A. Flawlessly.

Then again, I say, you could always play in E and set your *capo* on the fifth fret. Of course, if you use the *capo*, then you run the risk of playing a quarter tone sharp or flat.

I snap the *capo* onto the fretboard and play the riff in E.

Can you hear that? I say. *Ever*-so-slightly flat--just enough to hurt the ears. Well. The *capo*'s the easy way out, isn't it? The *lazy*-man's transposer. I try not to use a *capo* if I can help it.

I try to hand Kevin's guitar back to him. You play, he says, glaring at me. I'm going to get a drink.

Glen counts us into the song by hitting his drum sticks together. One, two, three--*shit.* He's counting us in too fast. I can do one of two things: grin and bear it--muddle my way through the song at top-speed--or stop him now and get it *right.* Four bars in, I make my decision. I step away from the mike and wave my arms for the band to stop.

Glen, I say, it's a laid-back *two-step* not a polka.

Glen starts hitting his drum sticks together again--still too fast.

To hell with it, I think. Ignoring Glen, I count the song in properly. Martin and George--and Glen, too, thank God--follow my count.

In a matter of seconds, the dance floor fills with bodies, all of them moving counter-clockwise in time with the music--almost in unison. If we sped-up the song now, they would all dance faster. If we slowed down to a crawl, they would crawl with us. Most of the couples careen past the stage without so much as a second glance at us; they seem to take their dancing very seriously. Some of the dancers, though, recognize me as they shuffle along. Greg Pederson and Cheryl Popowich give the "thumbs-up" sign; Sarah Matwychuk wriggles out of Luc Langevin's arms to momentarily applaud. As I sing the first line of the refrain--*Did lovers really fall in love to stay?*--I see Kirsten and Andy strolling onto the dance floor. I see Tanya Yuzko and Mike Brodziak wave to me from the Junior B table. I smile back, I sing louder.

> *Stand beside each other, come what may*
> *Was a promise really something people kept?*
> *Not just something they would say.*
> *Did families really bow their heads to pray,*
> *Daddies really never go away*
> *And [illegible]ho-ah--*

I know the next words, they're easy. *Who-ah Grandpa, tell me 'bout the good ol' days*. I've sung them a hundred times. But today, at the end of the refrain, I step away from the mike. I can't sing the line. Carla Senko is in the crowd. Near the back of the Rec. Centre, she is leaning against a wall, staring at the stage--staring at me. I wasn't thinking. Of all the songs I could have chosen, of all the songs I could have sung. "*Grandpa*." No one deserves this, not even Carla Senko.

When it comes time for me to start the second verse, I don't know what to do. I could stop the song altogether. Make up a new set of words, on the spot? Impossible. I pause on the A chord for several bars as I think. The band follows my lead--they stay on A, waiting for me to sing.

After six bars of the A chord, George moves close to me on stage. He whispers in my ear that it's OK. Just sing the first verse again, he says. George, evidently thinking that I've forgotten the words, gives me a wink of encouragement.

But now Carla is on the dance floor. And in the split second that it takes for me to recognize her dance partner, I start singing again. The first verse of "Grandpa," all over again. Carla is dancing with the cowboy in the black hat. *My* cowboy. Not just dancing with him, *flaunting* him--pulling him up toward the stage, so that I can't miss what's going on. I send my voice like an arrow.

> *Grandpa, tell me 'bout the good ol' days*
> *Sometimes it feels like*
> *This world's gone crazy*

Carla drops her hand from the small of the cowboy's back to the back pocket of his Wrangler's. She must have seen me look at him, earlier. She must know that I like him.

> *And Grandpa, take me back to yesterday,*
> *When the li-i-ine between right and wrong*
> *Didn't seem so hazy.*

I enunciate the words carefully, pressing the mike against my lips. So that Carla hears every word that I'm singing. Hovering in front of the stage, Carla nestles up close to the cowboy, kissing his neck.

After we've finished the song and I've left the stage, the band starts up again, without me. Henry is at the bar--getting a drink for me, I'm sure. Kirsten stays on the dance floor with Andy. Tanya throws her head back, laughing at some Junior B joke--in one hand, she holds a beer bottle; with her other hand, she tousles Mike's hair.

As I make my way through the crowd on the dance floor, Carla steps in front of me, forcing me stop and talk to her. In one hand, she holds a cigarette. The cowboy in the black hat is beside her, holding her other hand

Colleen, says Carla. Did you sing that song just for me? She says the words sweetly but her stare is cold and hard. The cowboy brushes her breasts as he wraps his arms around her waist.

Carla Senko doesn't wait for an answer. She leads the cowboy away, flicking her cigarette in my direction as they leave the Rec. Centre. Now that I've seen the cowboy's face--seen it up close--I change my mind about him. There are deep creases around his eyes, patches of grey hair under his hat. He's older than thirty. He must be fifty, at least.

Henry appears at my side with two drinks in his hands, asking if I'd like to dance. I nod. And then, for second, I watch Carla's cigarette smolder on the dance floor before I crush it with the heel of my boot.

***

Swaziland.

Somaliland.

No, Swaziland. *Swah-zee-land*.

I am in A.'s House of Music, talking to A. himself--Sole Proprietor, Certified Steinway Dealer, Registered Piano Technician. I'm explaining my musical background. I want to teach piano lessons in his store.

That in the north?

The south, actually.

In the south. Small country, yes?

Yes, right. Correct. Very small. It's a kingdom, actually.

By South Africa?

And Moçambique.

Never heard of it, he says, shrugging his shoulders as he marches off to the back of his store.

I'm not ready to be dismissed. I haven't given him my résumé yet. I haven't played for him. I haven't delivered my speech--about my experience, my enthusiasm, my love of children. My calling as a piano-teacher. *With my training, with my expertise, we can--together--build a new, vibrant vision for A.'s House of Music. We can--no, we* will--*take A.'s House of Music into the twenty-first century with the addition of A.'s* School *of Music.* I composed the speech last night--three drafts before I got it just right--then I memorized it, word for word.

Now, standing alone in A.'s shop, among A.'s Spanish guitars, his mandolins, his one upright bass--next to his violins and his banjos--I'm not sure what to do. Walk out, storm out. Try another piano store. A.'s House of Music is four blocks from my apartment. The next closest piano store is miles away. A. fusses around his desk in the back of the store, shuffling papers and ignoring me--as though I'm not even here.

Bach's *Prelude in C Minor*, that'll do it. Make him stand up and take notice. I wander over to the grand piano in the centre of the show-room, my palms sweating, my heart racing. I've neither seen nor touched a piano since I moved to Toronto; I've never--never ever--played a grand, a *real* grand. A.'s piano is a real grand, a Steinway. A *Steinway*. Eight-and-a-half feet of lacquered ebony. Ivory keys, solid brass hardware. Walnut legs. Hand-tooled soundboard. And all of it covered--oh, the horror!--in a fuzzy blanket of dust.

Here it is! says A., shuffling over to me and the Steinway with an enormous book in his hands. He drops the book onto the top of the piano. A.'s book is a World Atlas. He leans over the piano to flip through the index. There are tufts of grey hair growing on his neck, in his ears, out of his nose. The tip of the third finger on his right hand is missing, so he turns pages with the smooth, round little stump.

S, S, S, he says. P, Q, R--S. Singapore, Switzerland. No, no. Too far. Surinam. A. talks with a slight accent. Portuguese, probably. He rolls the r's in Switzerland and Surinam. Swaziland, he says. A-*ha*. He flips to a map of southern Africa, then pokes me with his elbow. Show me, he says. His breath smells of fish. He says, Point to it. I point.

That where you got that ring put in your nose? He rolls the r in ring, then taps the side of his nose.

Oh, no. Uh-uh. I--

Your mother, he says. What does she think of that? A. taps the side of his nose again.

She's never seen it. I got it pierced here in Toronto, on Bloor and--

Your mother doesn't know you're walking around with a ring in your nose. Shameful. He snaps the atlas shut.

Oh, no, I say, she knows. She knows all about it. I told her the day after--

Midway through my sentence, I stop. I'm lying. My mother doesn't know about the nose ring. She wouldn't sleep at night if she knew. But why bother trying to explain? A. isn't listening to a word I'm saying. He's walking to his desk at the back of the store, shaking his head. Muttering. This time I follow.

Look, Mr.--what do I call him? Sir, Mr. A.? I don't even know his name. Listen, Mr.--I stop again.

A. turns to stick out his hand, stumpy finger and all. Abe, he says.

OK, Abe, I say.

Uncle Abe, he says--sharply--you're too young to call me Abe.

All right, *Uncle* Abe, then. Well. Look, I, you know, I. Uh.

I can't say what I have to say. I can't believe what I'm *about* to say. I spit the words out quickly, before I change my mind.

I'll, um--I'll takethenoseringout if need be. I just really, really need a job. I really do. I've got this mountain of bills and rent and everything--and, you know, phone bills and stuff--and I'm a very, very good piano teacher. Really, I'm just really--you know--I'm really good at it. So, maybe I could--or, you could--you know, *we* could work something out. Yeah, work out some kind of a deal or something.

So much for the speech.

How old are you again? says Abe--*Uncle* Abe.

Nineteen.

Your mother and your father, they're still living in this Swaziland place?

In Swaziland? No. They're in Alberta. They never were in Swaziland. Just me. I was the only one. I went for two years, when I was seventeen.

I'm starting to wonder why I ever brought up Swaziland. I try to swing the conversation back to piano-teaching. I explain that before I left for Africa, I taught piano lessons for three years. Sixteen students in total, I say. All ages, five to fifteen.

So you leave your mother and father, says Abe, you go to this Swaziland place. Two years go by. Yes? I nod. Two years, says Abe, fishing around in his shirt pocket for a toothpick, then starts to pick at his teeth with it. Two years, he says. That's a long time. He picks some more.

I am transported back in time, back in space. I see my mother's shoulders shaking in the Edmonton International Airport, the tears streaming down her face. My dad's arm around her, holding her up. His chin quivering.

I studied music in Swaziland, too. Nine hours a week. Theory, composition--

Your mother and father. They don't want you home with them?

I hear Mom pleading with me--bribing me not to go to Toronto. Don't go. Study music at the university in Edmonton. We'll pay for your tuition, you books, your rent. Don't go.

You got any family here? Abe asks. Maybe you got yourself some kind of boyfriend that you're living so far from home? He raises his eyebrows. You in some kind of trouble?

No, I say, starting to answer his questions. I have no family here. Then I think, None of his damn business. I tell him that if he'd rather not hire a piano teacher, maybe it's best that I stop wasting his time.

No family, says Abe, repeating my words. Well, I'm without family, too. Forty years I've been in this city without family. Forty years. That's twice your age.

I'm ready to walk out of the store when Abe speaks up again.

You got a résumé handy?

Abe settles into the chair behind his desk as I hand him a copy of my résumé. I've had it printed on fancy--expensive--paper. Abe finishes a half-eaten tuna fish sandwich while he reads, dropping bits of lettuce and mayonnaise onto the paper. He leaves greasy thumbprints over my name, greasy smudges across the words "Employment Experience." While he sullies my masterpiece, I pace around his desk. It's a beautiful desk. A dream desk, from what I can see. Enormous, solid, mahogany. Only, every inch of Abe's desk is covered with junk--yellowed newspaper clippings; a pouch of tobacco; crusty, used handkerchiefs. A spool of copper wire; a plastic yellow shoe horn. He's got sheet music mixed up with invoices, a stack of old newspapers thrown over a stack of Yamaha manuals. Ballpoint pens, stubby pencils--the tips whittled with a knife. A half-green, half-copper treble-clef letter-opener and two marble bass-clef book-ends--no books between them. Price lists, memos, brochures, booklets. And on top of it all, a ukulele missing two strings.

Abe looks over my résumé for what feels like a long time. He nods periodically, flips back and forth between pages. All this, he says, pointing to my greasy employment experience, you did all this? I nod. And this, he says, pointing to my educational background, you did all this? I nod. Grade Ten Royal Conservatory? I nod. You got references? he asks. I nod.

So, Colleen Lutzak, he says, leaning towards me and squinting. What's in it for *me*?

Fifty per cent, I reply. Without hesitation.

Abe tosses my résumé aside, then turns his whole chair to face me. I can hear my own heart beating. I can *feel* the Steinway keys--smooth and cold--under my fingertips. Once he hires me, it will be--for all intents and purposes--mine. Before anything else, I'll dust it from top to bottom. Keys, legs, pedals--the whole thing. Abe belches. I'll polish it until I can see my face in the black veneer. Abe tucks his toothpick between his lips, then flicks the toothpick from one corner of his mouth to the other with his tongue. I'll christen the Steinway with a meaningful name, a grand name. Maybe Mary. No, Maria. For Sister Maria.

Lutzak, says Abe. That's not Portuguese. Lutzak sounds--Slavic? He poses it as a question.

I could lie. I probably *should* lie, say I'm Portuguese. Abe doesn't sound much like a Portuguese name but he's got to be Portuguese. All the store owners in this part of the city are Portuguese.

Slavic. Yes, I say. It's a Slavic name.

Honesty, I think. Honesty's the way to go. If I say that I'm Portuguese, he's bound to catch me at my lie sooner or later.

Jewish? says Abe. You look Jewish. You a Russian Jew? He rolls the r in Russian, sliding the toothpick as he speaks. Your mother. She's a Jew?

Does it matter? I ask. Now I'm starting to wonder if Abe has something against Jewish people. Maybe he's anti-Semitic.

You're ashamed of who you are? says Abe, sliding the toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other.

No, I say. I'm not the least bit *ashamed*. And--no. I'm not Jewish. But if I *were* Jewish, I wouldn't be ashamed of it. I'd be proud of it. There's nothing wrong with being Jewish. It just so happens that I'm *Ukrainian*. My mother is Ukrainian, Ukrainian

Orthodox. My Dad, too. I'm Ukrainian on both sides of my family. One hundred per cent, purebred Ukrainian. And proud *of* it.

Abe stops sliding his toothpick.

He suddenly starts pulling out newspaper clippings from under the ukulele, then he clears the junk off his desk with one swipe of his arms. Newspapers, manuals, sheet music, pens and pencils--they all tumble and fall from his desk. One book-end cracks in two as it hits the floor. The ukulele twangs, then goes silent. One by one, as though they are a deck of tarot cards, Abe places the clippings across his desk. His hands, I notice, are trembling.

The articles are streaked with neon yellow and orange. Abe has highlighted the important words. It is impossible to misunderstand what he is telling me--"Demjanjuk," "Treblinka," "Nazi war criminal." "Ukrainian."

I had family once, he says, quietly. The toothpick falls from his lips onto the floor. I had a wife. In Poland, before the war. Forty years ago. I had brothers, a sister.

For a moment, I stand frozen to my spot. Then, I say, But you said it yourself. Forty years is twice my age. I wasn't there, I had nothing to do with--

I was in Canada already, says Abe. I was going to send for her, my wife. But soldiers came. German soldiers, Ukrainian soldiers. I was in Canada already.

He pauses.

I don't even have photographs, he says. You know that? He lifts his eyes to meet mine. I don't have a photograph of her.

But I wasn't even born--

You have no business being here, says Abe. You have family. Go to them. Go begging to *them* with your fist open. You hear me? Go to your family.

Without a word, I make my way to the door, tears burning in my eyes. I'm a very, very good piano teacher, I say to myself. I'm very good at it. And I'm a good person. I didn't kill anyone. I had nothing to do with the deaths of his family. I'm a very, very good person. My family are good people. We've been here for almost a hundred years. He doesn't know a thing about us.

As I cross to the other side of the street, I glance back at A.'s House of Music. Abe has flipped the *Open* sign to *Closed*, and locked the door, and shut the blinds in the window.

***

New Mexico, Italy, Wales. Victoria, British Columbia.

Mr. Kaushal pauses to adjust his bifocals. He's reading to our grade eleven Social Studies class from a United World College brochure. Mr. Kaushal is always reading to us from brochures. Last week it was the World Vision "Thirty-Hour Famine" and a UNICEF literacy program for Nicaraguan child amputees. The week before he was pitching the Foster Parents' Plan, and the week before that, the Christian Children's Fund. Mr. Kaushal isn't Christian himself. He used to be Hindu, now he's Buddhist. He's very open-minded--he believes in the united human consciousness, plus he doesn't eat meat. He's an animal rights fanatic. There are Green Peace posters all around his classroom.

Mr. Kaushal continues. Italy, Wales--

You said that already.

The remark comes from the back of the classroom--from Ted Ross, the class smart-ass. Ted likes to fluster Mr. Kaushal, likes to catch Mr. Kaushal making mistakes in front of the class. Every so often, Ted poses hypothetical questions to Mr. Kaushal. Like, if your wife were being attacked by a rabid dog, would you kill the dog or let it maim her? If you were starving to death and the last piece of food on Earth was a hamburger, would you eat the hamburger or die of hunger? To Ted's questions, Mr. Kaushal gives serious answers--as though he doesn't even know that he's being laughed at. I'd try to soothe the dog. I'd eat the bun but not the burger. He's too nice to tell Ted to stay quiet, or get out.

Mr. Kaushal apologizes for repeating himself. Sorry, sorry, he says. Ted imitates Mr. Kaushal's accent under his breath--so*rry*, so*rry*. Ted's buddies and a few girls snicker.

Mr. Kaushal ignores them. These colleges, he says, unite young people from around the world. For two years, they live together--young people of every race, religion, and political background. They learn to live in harmony with each other.

Ted rolls his eyes.

There is also college in Singapore, says Mr. Kaushal, and one in Swaziland. Swaziland is in southern Africa. A peaceful look washes over Mr. Kaushal's face. Gandhi came from South Africa, he says. The bell rings, Mr. Kaushal jumps.

After Social Studies with Mr. Kaushal, I have ten minutes to get across the school to the Music Room for the last class of the day--Band with Mr. Schultz. If it weren't for Mr. Kaushal's after-class routine, I could do it easily. The school isn't that big. But the challenge is to slip past Mr. Kaushal without him noticing me. Otherwise, I'm in for a lengthy chat about his latest brochure. If I'm a second late for Band, Mr. Schultz will close the door in my face and I'll be forced to get a late slip from the office. Mr. Schultz is nothing like Mr. Kaushal. He runs his classes like boot camp. I already have two late slips against me--one more, and I'll be kicked right out for good.

Collee-een. Mr. Kaushal calls my name as I head out the door. I pretend that I haven't heard him. Colleen! He scurries down the hallway to catch up with me, then taps me on the shoulder. As I turn to Mr. Kaushal, I see my friends marching off to Band Class. None of them have late slips. Why doesn't he tap one of them on the shoulder?

I want you to take this home with you tonight, says Mr. Kaushal, passing me the United World Colleges brochure.

I glance down at my watch. Seven minutes and counting.

Talk about it with your parents, he says, and see what they think.

I stuff the paper into my knapsack, next to the Foster Parents' Plan pamphlet I got from him a few weeks ago. Thanks, Mr. Kaushal, I say. I'll do that. I'll definitely do that.

I'll be more than glad to help you along with the application process. Mr. Kaushal smiles.

I know what's coming. *Please don't start with stories about your daughter.*

My own daughter, says Mr. Kaushal. *She* was interviewed--how many years ago now? Let me think.

While Mr. Kaushal thinks, I look at my watch again. Five minutes. Four-and-a-half. Mr. Kaushal's daughter speaks four languages and has a Master's degree in

International Development and works for the World Health Organization in Cameroon. She is his favourite subject.

Nine years ago! he declares, then his voice gets soft. Nine years, so long ago. Mr. Kaushal looks down. You know, he says, my daughter didn't make the interview. Though she was close. I'm sure that she was close. *You* could do better, Colleen. I know you could--with your grades, and your music, and your interest in international issues. I'll write a glowing reference letter for you. Positively glowing.

I hardly hear Mr. Kaushal's last words. I thank him again, then I start to run.

Mr. Schultz is about to close the door to the Music Room when I come flying around the corner of the Music Wing. *Wait*! I yell. *I'm coming*! If Mr. Schultz doesn't see me, I'm sure that he hears me. But he is closing the door nonetheless--slamming the door, in fact. At the last second before the door shuts completely, I lunge forward, slipping my music folder between the door and the door frame. Mr. Schultz, shaking his head in disgust, is forced to let me in. In my most cheerful voice, I say, Thanks, Mr. Schultz. He says, Last time, Miss Lutzak. Last time.

Mr. Schultz's Nazi voice is drowned out by the sound of the clarinetists and the flautists tuning their instruments, the percussionist alternately tightening and whacking his snare. There are almost sixty students in our band class--fourteen clarinets, thirteen flutes, eight alto saxes, five tenor saxes. Some of our six trombonists double as tuba players, depending on the piece we're playing. We have three percussionists, one bass guitarist. In the trumpet section, there are four of us split into firsts, seconds, and thirds. Two second trumpets, one first trumpet, one third. I play third.

As I take my place among the trumpets, Oliver Morgan waves to me from across the section. While I yank my music out of my folder--"3rd Trumpet" emblazoned across the top of each sheet--Oliver starts on his inane warm-ups. He puckers and unpuckers his lips, massages his cheeks. Rolls his head clockwise, counter-clockwise, up, down. Then he swings his arms at the shoulder, as if to stretch them. All of this is done, I know, for my benefit. Oliver is in love with me. He's all but told me so with looks, winks, smiles. The warm-ups are supposed to impress me, dazzle me. Make me swoon.

It's not that I *dis*like Oliver, really. He's smart in school--gets good grades. He's not bad looking--blond, blue eyes, nice build. In fact, Oliver could be prime boyfriend-material if he weren't so eager to please Mr. Schultz. At the end of every band class, Oliver stays behind to straighten the chairs in the Music Room, to tidy the instruments in the storage room. At the beginning of every band class, he chats to Mr. Schultz about famous brass players, famous brass pieces, famous brass recordings. In every piece for the last two years, Mr. Schultz has given the first trumpet part to Oliver--Oliver, Mr. Schultz's pet; Oliver, who can't play to save his life. It's a sort of running joke in band class, a joke that everyone is in on. Everyone except Oliver and Mr. Schultz.

Today, we're working on our Christmas repertoire for the Christmas Concert. We've been working on our Christmas repertoire since the beginning of September. As always, we start with *Christmas in Tijuana.* Featuring Oliver's sixteen-bar trumpet solo. It's bad enough I had to sit through him squawking it out last Christmas, now I've got to endure it all over again. Mr. Schultz resurrects songs to save time and, of course, to put on a good show for the town. Only two or three of our Christmas pieces are new to us--

the others are songs we learned for last year's Christmas concert. *Rudolph the Red-Necked Reindeer* and *The Rock 'n' Roll Noel*--those are new. But the *I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus/O Holy Night Medley*, that's old. *Handel's Hallelujah Chorus for Band*, old. *A Classical Christmas*, *The Christ-Child Samba*, *A Christmas Tribute to Elvis*--old, old, old.

Midway through the *Tijuana* trumpet solo, Oliver quits his bleating. He's lost his place. Again. That's my cue. I've got the whole solo memorized and I play it in my head along with him--so that when he falls apart, I'm there to pick it up the pieces. Mr. Schultz shuts down the band but I keep playing, all by myself. *Quiet*! Mr. Schultz shrieks. Oliver apologizes profusely. I roll my eyes.

Thirty-six bars into our second run at *Tijuana*--just after the flute trills and before the trombone swell--Mr. Schultz stops us again. I know what's coming. I brace myself.

Third trumpets! Mr. Schultz bellows.

Why does he say third trumpets when we all know that there's only one of us?

What are you doing! he yells.

When Mr. Schultz gets annoyed or angry, his German accent comes out. It sounds more like, *Vot* are you doing. I give Mr. Schultz my most blank, most innocent look. I bat my eyelashes. Oliver smiles at me sympathetically, oblivious to *vot* I'm doing. Oliver has no ear for music so he has no idea that I'm playing my thoroughly *un*interesting, entirely *un*inspired third-trumpet line three times louder than I should. Once in a while, I play loudly like this to remind Mr. Schultz that I'm the best trumpet player in the band and that I've been unjustly relegated to the bottom of the trumpet section. He says that my attitude is the problem. But it's hard to change my attitude when I'm stuck playing third trumpet. Two years in the high school band and I haven't even been promoted to *second* trumpet.

Softer! says Mr. Schultz.

All right. You want *zovter*, I'll play *zovter*. We start the piece over. This time, I play my trumpet so quietly that it can't be heard over the other trumpets. I have marvelous control over my instrument. I can do anything with it. Mr. Schultz stops us again. He points his Nazi baton in my direction.

Play louder! he says.

Oh, I say, trying my best to look confused. I'm so *sorry*, Mr. Schultz, I thought you wanted me to play softer. My mistake.

You will play at the proper volume or you will not play at all! he says.

I generally know how far to push him. I behave myself for the duration of *Tijuana*.

After *Tijuana*, we muddle our way through *Elvis*. Then--*The Rock 'n' Roll Noel*. The third trumpet doesn't come in until the thirteenth bar so I leave my trumpet across my lap. Just as well. We've been playing *The Rock 'n' Roll Noel* for three months now and we have yet to get past bar twelve. It's the alto saxes. They can't actually read music. Most of them have chosen to play saxophone because it's cool. And Mr. Schultz doesn't much care if any them--if any of us, really--can read music, he just wants to put on a good show for the town. Like clockwork, he silences the band after bar twelve. Time for the saxes' daily section work. Mr. Schultz walks them through their line, note by note, over and over again. A few more classes and they'll have their part more or less memorized--enough to fake it at the concert, at least.

We're not permitted to make a sound while Mr. Schultz does section work, though I'm tempted to play the sax parts on my trumpet. I've heard them play their lines so often that *I've* got them memorized. But Michelle Glynn got bawled out in grade ten when she started practicing her xylophone as Mr. Schultz worked with the tubas. Since then we've all kept quiet. To the left of me, Kerri-Lynn Stratford opens her chemistry textbook. The clarinets pass notes back and forth between them. Oliver does more lip exercises, glancing in my direction frequently to see if I'm watching. I pull out the brochure Mr. Kaushal has given to me.

Kerri-Lynn drops a note in my lap, onto the brochure. She's written in the margins of her Periodic Table. *Oliver + Colleen,* it says. Kerri-Lynne watches while I read. I roll my eyes, she smiles. In the margins of the United World Colleges brochure, I write, *Mr. Schultz + Oliver is more like it!!!*

Kerri-Lynn passes back the brochure. She's written, *There's a word for that, isn't there*? I pass the note back. *Homosexuality.*

As Kerri-Lynne passes the brochure to me again, I feel a hand on my shoulder. My heart stops. There is silence, suddenly, in the Music Room--absolute silence. The saxes have stopped playing, the rest of the students in the room have stopped shuffling papers. Mr. Schultz leans over my shoulder, reaching for the brochure in front of me; I slide my hand over my lap to cover it. Mr. Schultz tugs, I press down hard with my hand.

Release it! he says.

It's private, I say.

Lift your hand! he says.

As Mr. Schultz scans the brochure, I turn my head slightly to the left, making eye contact with Oliver--half-expecting Oliver to speak up and try to take the blame. But there is no time for anyone to save me. Mr. Schultz crumples the brochure in his hand.

Miss Lutzak, he says, you have disrupted my class for the last time. You will take your books, take your trumpet--you will take everything *and leave*!

Mr. Schultz's words get louder and louder, like a crescendo; his face starts to turn purplish as he says, *unt leave*. In front of me, the clarinets and flutes have all turned around in their seats to watch what is going on. To my left, the saxophones are all leaning forward in their chairs, cocking their heads to the right. It occurs to me that I have an audience.

Do you mean leave *today's* class? I say. You know, just leave *for the day*, or do you mean, like, leave *forever*?

I smile sweetly at Mr. Schultz. He picks up my music folder and throws it across the room, scattering third trumpet parts across the floor.

Oliver gets up from is chair to pick up the scattered music but Mr. Schultz orders him to sit down. While I pack up my trumpet, Mr. Schultz warns that my parents will be receiving a call, and that there will be a meeting arranged by the principal of the school. I mutter under my breath as he talks, taking in only half of what he says.

Do you hear me? Mr. Schultz yells. There will be a meeting with the principal! *Do you hear me?*

Pausing at the front of the class, on my way out the door of the Music Room, I twirl around to face Mr. Schultz. *Yes*, I say, my eyes blazing. Yes, I *hear* you, loud and clear. You're talking about how much you're going to miss me in the trumpet section. How much you're going to miss sticking me with the worst parts; how much you're going to miss *boring* me with the easiest, crappiest, *least important* lines. I hear you now, but I wish that I'd heard you a long time ago!

On my way out, I slam the door to the Music Room. My knees are trembling, and my lips, and my hands. I'm in real trouble now, I've never spoken like this to a teacher. Will I be suspended? Oh *God*. For all I know, the principal could expel me. Probably I should go to Dad's classroom, explain the whole incident from beginning to end--so that he doesn't hear about it second-hand in the Staff Room. Probably I should call Mom at her school, warn her--so that she's expecting the news when it comes.

Of course, there's no turning back now. No way to change what I've done, take back what I've said. Probably an apology wouldn't do any good. And, say I did apologize; say Mr. Schultz let me back into class: I'd be right back in the third trumpet chair. Right back where I started. With a deep breath, then, I knock on the Music Room door--once, twice; when Mr. Schultz swings open the door, I nearly rap his forehead with a third knock.

That piece of paper you took from me, I say. That brochure.

I want it *back*.

***

Side by side on the sidewalk outside of A.'s House of Music are a newspaper dispenser and a phone booth. I kick the newspaper dispenser, then I slam open the phone booth door. Two phone books, White Pages and Yellow Pages. I grab the Yellow Pages and then--as violently as I can--I flip to the U portion of the book. U for Ukrainian. Ukrainian stores, shops, restaurants, businesses, anything. Where there are Ukrainian establishments there are Ukrainian people. And where there are Ukrainian people, Little Ukraine. I should have thought of this weeks ago--after the Portuguese woman yelled at me in her store. I should have realized that I'm not welcome here, that I don't belong here. Time to move out. Move on. Start over again in a new part of the city--among my own kind, my own people.

Except that I find nothing under U--no Ukrainian listings whatsoever between *Typewriter Sales* and *Ultrasonic Services and Supplies.* I turn to E. E for Ethnic. *Escort Services, Estate Consultants, Excavating Contractors*--no Ethnic. What now? Culture! I go to C. I find *Crutches, Culverts* and *Curling Rink Supplies.* Fuck. This is *fucked.* This whole is city is *fucked.* I half expect to look under F and find my own name staring me in the face.

Then, by accident, it happens. My eye catches the listings for *Craft Centres* and *Craft Supplies*, right before *Crutches*. There are pages and pages of listings. *Crafts and Kiboodles, The Craft Corner, Crafts Canada. Creative Crafts, Country Crafts. The Kraft King.* A right there--among the macramé dealers, the yarn manufacturers, the paper tole wholesalers--*Carpathia Arts.* The Carpathians are a mountain range in Ukraine. According to the Yellow Pages, the address of *Carpathia Arts* is Bloor Street West. Will

I remember the address? I rip the page out of the book and shove it into my pocket. Wrong, I know--morally and legally wrong. But who in this neighborhood is ever going to look for Ukrainian art?

On my way home to inspect the Yellow Pages booty, I stop in at the doughnut shop next to my apartment to buy cigarettes. Not many people know that the doughnut shop owner sells cigarettes. It's strictly under-the-table, black market. He sells individual cigarettes--for people who are too down-and-out to buy a full pack--and pot, too, and miscellaneous other drugs. Nothing too hard. I only know because I tagged along a few times with Salina to buy smokes. I've never actually bought anything from him before, not even a doughnut. Today is a first--the first time I don't have enough for a pack. My plan is to make a big, strong pot of coffee and put Joni Mitchell on the ghetto blaster and light some beeswax candles and chain-smoke and sketch out my new life. Cigarettes are crucial to the plan. I need cigarettes.

The doughnut shop is empty, save for two old men sitting at a table in the corner playing checkers--and the owner.

Sweetheart! The owner greets me from behind the counter as though I come in every day. Maybe he remembers me from my visits to his shop with Salina. His pot-belly bulges out between the buttons of his shirt; there is black hair--thick and curly--creeping up the front and the back of his neck. I want to tell him that I'm not his sweetheart, that nothing could ever induce me--ever, ever--to become his sweetheart. But I bite my tongue. Best not to make a scene. I need the cigarettes.

And how are you doing today? he says, grinning, rubbing his belly under his shirt with his chubby, hairy hand. What can I get for you--doughnut? bagel? muffin? coffee? tea? juice?

Just cigarettes, I say. A half-pack, please.

The owner's smile fades a little. He shakes his head. I don't sell cigarettes, he says. You have to go across the street to the confectionery. How about an apple fritter? he smiles again. A jelly doughnut? Doughnut holes are on special today, a dollar a dozen, or you can get a coffee and a--

What do you mean? I ask, interrupting his sales pitch. You mean you don't sell cigarettes anymore?

Now his face falls altogether. I never sold cigarettes, he says. This is a doughnut shop. You want a doughnut, fine. You want cigarettes, go to the confectionery across the street. He looks annoyed.

Actually, I say, smiling, I know for a *fact* that you sell cigarettes here. My friend buys her smokes here all the time. I've been with her a couple of times. I thought you recognized me.

The owner keeps shaking his head. I don't know what you're talking about, he says. I have no license to sell tobacco products so, whether I recognize you or not, I'm not *selling* you tobacco products, understand? You know what the fine is for selling tobacco without a license?

I look him in the eye.

You know what the fine is, sweetheart? he repeats, leaning across the counter toward me.

Something snaps inside me, I feel blood rush to my face.

I know that I'm not your sweetheart, I hiss. I know that you sell illegal, tax-free cigarettes to everyone in this neighbourhood. Everyone. And I know damn well that you won't sell to me because I'm not Portuguese. You think I'm stupid? You think I don't know how things work around here? If I had asked for cigarettes in *Portuguese*--or, you know, if I asked in *English* but then tacked an *obrigado* onto the end of the question--then I would be smoking *as we speak*.

Just what the hell are you talking about? The owner crosses his arms over his belly. You're crazy, you know that? He looks at the old men in the corner. This chick's crazy, he says. Then he starts wiping the counter with a rag.

No, I say. *No.* I grab the rag out of his hand. No, no, no, no, *no*! I'm *not* crazy. I'm not the least *bit* crazy. I'm the only sane person in this--in this narrow-minded, intolerant, *prejudiced* neighbourhood. The only sane person, that's what *I* am!

The more I speak, the louder my voices gets. The owner's eyes widen. The old men stop their checkers game to watch.

You know who's crazy? I continue. I'll tell you who's crazy! That old bat who runs the confectionery across the street? *She's* crazy. And that old--that old prick who owns the piano store? *He's* crazy. Me, I'm *sane*.

I'm yelling now.

You want to know something? You want to know how *hard* I try? I smile, I say hello. I'm pleasant and neighbourly, and I'm friendly. I--I tickle babies. I give up my seat for old people on the streetcar. You think anyone will smile back? Say hello *back*? Forget it. Not a chance. You people just *shut* me out--all of you--like I'm, like I'm--subhuman or something. Like I'm a goddamned leper! What have I ever done to you? Tell me, please! What have I done? I want cigarettes. *Cigarettes*! Is that so much to ask?

I stop to catch my breath. Then I say it again, my voice petering out. Is that so much to ask?

One of the old men in the corner says something in Portuguese to the owner--who says something back, scratches his belly, then reaches reluctantly for something under the cash register.

An open pack of Rothmans.

Ten smokes in there, he says, pushing the pack toward me. I drop a fistful of change onto the counter. Thank you, I say to him, picking up the pack. Thank you very much.

I straighten my shoulders and, with my head held high, I make my way toward the door. As I'm about to walk out of the doughnut shop, I turn to the old men in the corner. They're back at their checkers game, sipping black coffee and talking quietly, as though nothing has happened. Thank you, I say. The old men keep playing. Then I say, *Obrigado*, and they nod.

***

Sunday morning--six days to the UWC scholarship interview--I'm on my bed, playing my guitar and singing. Sifting through my *Original Compositions* box, choosing the perfect song for the scholarship committee.

It's Sister Maria's idea, actually--that I bring my guitar to the interview, sing a song for the committee. She helped me choose an outfit, too--the navy-blue shorts suit that I wore to the Kiwanis Music Festival last spring--and, after my last piano lesson, she quizzed me on current events while we drank tea, ate cookies. I told her that she's been a life saver; that I don't know how to thank her for all of her support, all of her encouragement. What would I do without her? My own mother has been trying to talk me out of going to the interview. Sister Maria said that I should win the scholarship. That's all the thanks she needs.

I have an enormous stack of materials to go through--loose-leaf sheets, napkins, old envelopes. I've written songs on everything. I keep all of my them--all three hundred and six of my songs--under my bed, in an old hockey-skate box.

Some are obviously out. *Number Fifteen*, that's a dud. I wrote it when I was in the seventh grade, after a junior high school basketball tournament. Number 15 on the Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan team reminded me of Tom Cruise. *Will I Be With You Tonight?* Better, eighth grade, more sophisticated lyrics. The afternoon before the Spring Sock-Hop, I was *inspired* to write it--Michael Holowaychuk smiled at me in the hallway at school. Michael Holowaychuk, who ended up slow-dancing with Carla Senko all night.

Come to think of it, I'd rather do *You Are An Eagle (For Joe Redcrow Jr.)*. At least I went out with Joe Jr. The lyrics are deep, lots of minor chords in the harmonic structure of the song. Of course, when Joe Jr. suddenly moved back to Saddle Lake, I had to revise some of the words. *You flew to me and said that you'd be mine.* That was the last line. I had to change it to *You flew back to your mother, and you never said goodbye.* Actually, he went to live with his *kukum*, his grandmother. But neither *kukum* nor *grandmother* fit the music.

After going through a dozen-odd love songs, it occurs to me that the committee might not be impressed much with romance. Political themes, social activism--that's the way to go. *Protest* music. I flip ahead to some of my more recent compositions. There's *Daddy Went to Vietnam.* I sing the chorus out loud, strumming my guitar.

> *Can a flag tell me about the man I never knew?*
> *Can a flag hold my mother like her lover used to do?*
> *Can this flag that flies for every war we've ever won*
> *Tell me if my daddy was the winner in Vietnam?*

Hell of a chorus--brilliant, really--but overdone. *Vietnam's* been overdone, that is. And it's sort of dated, too. I need something more current. *Miss a Meal for Moçambique* might do the trick, though it seems a little didactic. How about *Hear the Cries*? It's more subtle--too subtle, maybe. Will the committee know it's about the massacre of Tibetans by Chinese Communists? What if the committee is pro-Communism? Safer to stick with something more generic. *Holding Hands.*

> *Holding hands*
> *Reaching out for others in other lands*
> *Caring for your brothers*
> *And holding their hands!*

Brothers. The feminists on the committee could be offended.

Back to the drawing board.

I leave my bedroom to make a cup of herbal tea for throats. The stuff tastes like boiled grass and it looks like pee but I drink it because Sister Maria says that it's supposed to protect the vocal chords from infection. I want to make sure that I don't come down with a throat infection before the interview. When I walk into the kitchen, I'm surprised to see Yolande Yuzko sitting with Mom at the kitchen table. I didn't hear Yolande come in. They're drinking coffee, eating poppyseed cake--my favourite. They're talking, too, though they stop abruptly when I appear.

Hi Yolande, I say, leaning over her shoulder to grab a piece of poppyseed cake. Yolande gives me a funny look--a sympathetic sort of puppy-dog look. It's all right, I say to her, laughing. If I get a scholarship, I'm fully prepared to give up my mother's poppyseed cake. It's only two years. Sister Maria says that we'll all blink twice and I'll be home again and we'll all be together for good.

Yolande knows all about the colleges, the interview, the scholarship. Mom has been phoning her every night to talk about it. Neither Yolande nor Mom laughs at my joke.

Colleen, says Mom, sit down. Join us for a cup of coffee.

So that you can brainwash me into staying home? For-*get* it. Uh-uh. Plus Sister Maria says that coffee dries the vocal chords and I've got tons of singing to do. *Tons*.

Again, no laughter. Just five minutes, Mom says. And I promise, no coffee. Yolande's brought us some--some news. Something you need to hear.

Wes barges in through the kitchen door, slamming it shut behind him and then dropping his rifle onto the linoleum. He's all decked out in Real Tree camo, his face smudged with black and green paint.

Mom screeches, Is that thing loaded?

Wes ignores her. Hey! he says to Yolande, grinning. You still here?

Tell me that gun isn't loaded, says Mom, her voice still raised.

Number one, says Wes, it's not a *gun*, it's a *rifle*. And number two, no, it isn't loaded. It's empty. I emptied it into a rabbit about ten minutes ago. Wes lets out his war-cry, *Yee-hoooooo*.

Killer, I hiss under my breath.

Oh C'lleen, he says as he pours himself a glass of milk. Sorry to hear about your piano teacher. That's a real bummer, eh? He gulps down the milk.

What about my piano teacher? I ask him. Then I turn to Mom. Sister Maria isn't teaching me anymore? Mom looks at Yolande. *What*? I say, getting distraught. Is she moving or something--getting transferred to another convent? Can they *do* that?

Didn't you tell her? says Wes, stuffing two pieces of poppyseed cake into his mouth at once.

Tell me WHAT? I say. What is there to tell me?

She died, says Wes, his mouth full. Sorry, he shrugs. I thought you knew. He picks up his rifle, then goes back outside.

How do you know? I spit the words at Yolande. Who told you?

I was on call last night, says Yolande.

Of course, I should have figured it out. Yolande is an x-ray technician; she picks up all kinds of gossip working at the hospital.

They brought her in around eight, Yolande continues.

Who? I ask. *Who* brought her in? *Who*?

The other sisters, says Yolande, softly. Two of them, Sister Madelaine and Sister Marie-Claire. But it was too late. The doctor on call said that she had a massive heart attack. Even if they'd brought her in sooner, it wouldn't have made a difference. It was her time.

That's not true, I say, my throat tightening. That can't be true. I just had a lesson with her a few days ago--Tuesday. Not even a *week* ago. She was fine on Tuesday, she was herself. Nothing different about her. It couldn't be her--there must be a mistake--someone else--it couldn't be--

Colleen, says Yolande, I *saw* her. I saw her after she went, and she looked beautiful. Very peaceful. She looked like she was at peace.

The phone rings and I seize the opportunity to get out of the kitchen--get out of the house. At peace. That's what they say about everybody who dies. Sister Maria was peaceful, full of peace? Yolande doesn't know that--nobody knows that. Nobody has any idea how Sister Maria felt--if she was in pain, afraid, alone. *Angry*. I grab my cigarettes from their hiding place in my underwear drawer, then I head outside--toward the bushes behind the house and down the trail that leads from the machine shed to the clearing at the top of the hill. Here it's peaceful.

Dad keeps three old granaries in the clearing plus an enormous stack of firewood cut from deadfall, an old rusted-out threshing machine that he can't bear to part with, and eleven snowmobiles. The snowmobiles aren't any good. I stretch out across them and look up at the sky, my eyes wide open. They're Merc snowmobiles--all of them--and none is newer than twenty-three years old. Really, they're antiques. Merc doesn't even make snowmobiles anymore. Dad loves his Mercs because they're big, solid, working machines; good for overnight ice-fishing trips--not like the new fiberglass racing Ski-Doos. Three of Dad's Mercs are in working condition, greased-up and ready-to-go in the machine shed. But these snowmobiles, nestled between the pines and the poplars, the wild hazelnut and cranberry and raspberry bushes--these Mercs will never run again. They're stripped and gutted for parts now.

Can Sister Maria see me sprawled in this snowmobile cemetery, crying? I can't believe that she's gone. I can't believe it. Tears trickle from my eyes, down my temples and into my hair. I need her. I need her to talk to me, to tell me things. To take my hands off the keys when I'm playing poorly, waltz around her music room when I'm playing well. To ruffle my hair when I make a joke. To squeeze my hand when I'm down. We were supposed to learn *Malaguena* for two pianos, four hands. We were supposed to go to Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* at the Jubilee Auditorium in Edmonton. I was supposed to invite her over for supper and show her my cat. She loves cats--love*d* cats, I mean--but they wouldn't allow them at the convent. I was supposed to write her long letters when I go away to college. I was supposed to tell her all about Africa when I got there. When we talked about my scholarship interview, Sister Maria didn't say *if*--she never said *if*. She said *when*.

Because I am sobbing, I don't hear them approaching--our dog, Ralph, first, licking the tears from my face, and behind him, Dad. There is hardly time for me to sit up and no time at all to put out my cigarette or hide the pack. I lower my hand behind the back end of one of the Mercs, hoping Dad won't notice. He's never seen me smoke; I don't think he knows that I do it.

Beautiful day, says Dad, scratching Ralphie behind the ears. No mosquitoes yet.

I nod, wiping the tears from my face. Afraid that if I open my mouth, I'll start sobbing again.

Mind if I sit down? Dad asks. I shake my head. Then he grabs the cigarette pack. May I? he says. I nod again, surprised because I know that he doesn't smoke.

I guess you've heard, Dad says. I don't say anything. Father Levasseur just called the house, he says. Ralph curls up at Dad's feet. He asked to talk to you, Colleen. Dad pauses to take a drag. The smoke swirls out the corner of his mouth. He'd like you to sing for Sister Maria's funeral.

Uh-uh. I shake my head, sniffling. Someone else can do it. Not me.

He asked for you, Colleen, not somebody else. *You*.

Ralph gets up suddenly, starts pacing at the base of a spruce. There must be a squirrel on the upper branches of the tree.

That's crazy, I say. Lots of Sister Mari--lots of her students sing. Claire Boisvert, Angèle Thibault. I'm not Catholic, I've never been to a Catholic funeral. I've never even been to *Mass*. Why me?

The sisters asked for you, says Dad. *Specifically*. They asked for you to sing *Ave Maria*. Mom told Father Levasseur that you know the song and he said that he'd arrange for one of Maria's other students to accompany you.

Ralph starts scratching around the tree.

Mom talked to him? I ask. Dad nods. Then she already told him I'd do it, didn't she? Dad takes a drag on his cigarette. *Didn't she?*

I pause.

Well, she can phone him right back and tell him I'm not doing it. I'm not. I'm *sick* of being asked to sing--every wedding, every birthday, every concert. And now--funerals. Why me? Why always me? Other people get to sit there and enjoy, but not me. Never me. I'm the one who has to practice and get nervous and puke. Well, I won't do it anymore! I'm *sick* of it.

I know that it's hard for you, says Dad.

No you don't, I say. You don't know that first thing about it.

You think I want to be M.C. at every wedding? he asks, softly. And every graduation and every twenty-fifth wedding anniversary? I don't. You think I want to give the eulogy at every prayer service, every toast to the bride, every key-note address--I don't want to do it, I never want to do it. I know what it's like. I know about the sleepless nights, the stomach cramps, the diarrhea. You think I haven't gone through all that?

So why do you keep doing it, then? I ask.

Dad shrugs. Because they ask, I suppose. Because I'm good at it. Because I wouldn't be any happier sitting in the crowd. You and I, says Dad, we're performers. That's our calling. And when we're called to do it, we have no choice.

Ralph starts barking wildly now, howling and jumping at the lower branches of the spruce. Dad calls for him to stop but he keeps woofing and yowling.

I'd sing *Ave Maria*? My voice trembles.

Ave Maria, says Dad. That's what the sisters want, and Father Levasseur. That's what he said that Sister Maria would want.

Let's go, Ralph, says Dad, grabbing the dog by the collar. Let's go back before you bark yourself to death. Come on, Ralphie!

I cringe at the mention of death, the tears return. Dad notices that I'm crying.

If I were giving the eulogy, he says, I'd probably say something like "for everything there is a season." He puts his arms around me. Doesn't make it any easier, does it? he asks. Ralph appears at my side, rubbing his nose against my leg. My sobs are muffled by the flannel of Dad's shirt, the breadth of his shoulder.

For the funeral, Dad wears a black suit and a black-and-red polka-dotted tie; Mom wears a plain black dress, long, with white appliqué daisies around the neckline. I wear my navy-blue shorts suit. It's the closest I have to black. And Sister Maria liked it. Mom thinks that the outfit is inappropriate--Shorts to a funeral! It shows disrespect!--but she's letting it go. In the car, on the way to town, Mom says, Just this once. Next time you're wearing a *dress*. But there will be no next time. Sister Maria will be buried only once.

Dad has the air conditioning in the car turned up full-blast. It's twenty-seven degrees outside today so it feels more like the middle of July than the beginning of May. There isn't a cloud in the sky. Mom makes idle conversation about her garden and her bedding plants. I want to get the cucumbers planted this afternoon, she says, and maybe my petunias if there's time. Nobody responds but she continues. I wonder if there'll be frost. Middle of May, we usually get frost. Maybe I should wait with the cucumbers.

Dad looks at me through the rearview mirror. You OK back there? he asks, ignoring Mom's chatter. I clench my fist around the Kleenexes scrunched up in the palm of my hand.

Fine, I reply. I'm fine.

Just don't look at the casket while you sing, Mom says, matter-of-factly. Or the congregation. Don't look at them, either. They'll all be crying, you know.

I don't know who will be in the cathedral for the funeral. Sister Maria has almost no family--one brother from Montreal and his son, some cousins from the Old Country maybe. I don't imagine that they'll make it to the funeral. All of the nuns will be there, of course, and the priests--however many of them there are in town, two or three--and the bishop. Sister Maria's piano students, their parents. The odd friend she may have had from outside the convent. I can't imagine there would be more than thirty or forty people. The church, I think, will be nearly empty.

I'm shocked, then, as we approach the Catholic Church. Cars line the street in front of the cathedral, across from the cathedral, beside the convent and the rectory. There are Saskatchewan and British Columbia license plates on some of the cars. Sister Maria's ex-students, maybe. Dad pulls the car around to the parking lot at the back of the church; it's full, too.

So many people! says Mom. Where did they all come from?

We end up parking in a residential section, three blocks from the church. Two cars follow us, parking in front of our car. I feel nauseous, a combination of heat and nerves and fear. What if I cry in front of all these people? What if I can't stop? While we walk up the stairs of the cathedral, a hearse parks at the side of the church. I press my fistful of Kleenex against my eyes to absorb the tears forming there.

Dad, I whisper, as we enter the church. He doesn't hear me. *Dad*! He puts his arm around me, leaning down so that I can whisper in his ear. My voice cracks.

I can't do this, Dad. I can't. I can't do it. Organ music fills the cathedral, *The Twenty-third Psalm*.

You *can*, Colleen, says Dad. Mom gives me peck on the cheek, then joins Yolande in a pew near the front of the church. Dad pulls me aside at the back of the church. He takes the red handkerchief out of his breast pocket. Of *course*, you can, he says, gently wiping my eyes with the hanky. It's not going to be easy but you're going to do it--and do it beautifully.

No, I'm not, Dad. I'm not! I'm starting to panic now. Go tell the priest, I say. Please, Dad. *Please*. Tell him I've changed my mind.

Dad puts his hands on my shoulders. What would Sister Maria tell you right now? he asks. If she were here, what would she say to you? Would she let you quit?

I don't know. I shrug. I have no idea what she'd say.

Come on, *think*! says Dad. Before a recital, before a festival. What would she say?

I blow my nose into the red hanky. Concentrate, I say. She'd say *concentrate* and *focus*.

All right, then. Dad grabs my hand as he makes his way toward the organ. There are special pews behind the organ for the organist, choir singers, and soloists. I'm going to sit right here next to you, he says. I'm going to be with you the *whole* time. And I'm going to concentrate with you. We're going to concentrate *together*.

But I can hardly concentrate on Father Levasseur's words, the prayers or the hymns. I stare out into the crowd--to the sea of faces I've never seen before. The women dab their eyes with tissue, the men sit up straight and stoic. When they stand, I stand; when they kneel, I kneel. At the front of the church, up near the priest, lies Sister Maria. Her casket is open--half of it, anyway; flowers cover the rest of the casket. Bright pink and white orchids, pink roses, and deep green ivy tendrils. There are bouquets of carnations and daisies on either side of the casket, too--and, beside the organ, an enormous basket of starburst lilies. I'm close enough to the lilies that I can taste them, raw and pungent. Not close enough to see Sister Maria's face. Not close enough to touch her.

From time to time while Father Levasseur talks, I watch the organist, Monique Delongchamps. I watch her for signs of nerves--shaky hands, missed chords, tempo problems--to see if she's as scared as I am. She doesn't make any mistakes. It's amazing. Not a single mistake. I look closely at her legs working the pedals of the organ. Her knees don't tremble. I look at her hands between songs; she doesn't wipe them on her lap, so they must not be sweating. She has flawless control--a true performer, an absolute professional. Sister Maria would be proud of Monique, playing her way through the service without so much as a wrong note. Years ago, Sister Maria was her teacher. I have to say that now, too. Sister Maria was my teacher, I was her student.

While I watch Monique, I try to practice *Ave Maria* in my head. The first time through, I mess up the words--jumble them up, all in the wrong order. *Dominus tecum, gratia plena* instead of *gratia plena, dominus tecum.* On my second try, I think *Santa Maria*, then remember that it's *Sancta Maria*, then forget what comes after *Sancta Maria.* It's the word *Maria.* I can't get past it. And the smell of the lilies on the casket--such a thick, sickly smell--it makes me want to vomit. Sister Maria wouldn't have liked them; she would have liked smaller flowers, odourless flowers. Wildflowers, maybe. Do they smell? Or bright red poppies.

It seems clear to me, after my third failed attempt to recite *Ave Maria* in my head, that I need the words written out in front of me. Usually I don't sing with words in front of me. In fact, I've don't think that I've ever sung with words in front of me. There's something distinctly unprofessional about a singer who can't even memorize her words. Now, as I sit waiting for my name to be called, I don't care if I look at words. I don't care if I look unprofessional. A wave of panic ripples through me. My palms start to sweat--my underarms, the backs of my legs; my stomach tightens into a knot. Having the words in front of me is the only thing that will get me through this, I'm sure of it. If only I'd thought of it sooner. If only I'd brought a copy of *Ave Maria* with me.

Monique, I whisper. Pssst. Monique! I give Monique a poke. You have an extra copy of *Ave Maria* with you? Monique shakes her head. Is it OK, I ask, if I look off your copy then? I need the words and I forgot mine at home.

My copy doesn't *have* words, says Monique. She shows me the music she uses for *Ave Maria*. It's the original Bach *Prelude*, photocopied from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. And she's right--no words.

Here, Monique says, handing me a pencil and the first page of *The Twenty-third Psalm*. Quick! Write the words out on the back of this.

For a moment, I'm relieved. I'll write the words out, I'll be fine. I'll have something in front of me to focus on instead of the casket and the flowers and the pews filled with sniffling women. Then I try to write. I try to write but--besides *Ave* and *Maria*--I can't remember a word of the song. It's crazy. I've sung *Ave Maria* for years--since Dean and Diana's wedding. I've practiced it at least a hundred times, I know it inside and out. Backwards and forwards.

Dad! I tug on the sleeve of Dad's suit jacket. Dad! I can't remember the words. What am I going to do?

Shhh, says Dad. Try to relax, take a deep breath. When you get up there to sing, the words will be there. Don't worry. It's just nerves. He puts his arm around me, pulling me close to his side. You'll be fine, he says.

But when it's time for me to sing--when I'm standing up, behind the microphone, beside the organ--I'm not fine. The lily-smell makes me dizzy and I sway while Monique plays the introduction. She plays it just like we practiced--two bars--and gives me the bass-note cue, just like we practiced. I sway in silence, listening to my cue come and go. Monique plays the two-bar introduction again, this time looking at me while she plays, her eyebrows raised. After her third time through the introduction, I open my mouth, get the first words out--*Aaaaa-veeee Mariiiiiii-aaaa*--then nothing. I can't remember the rest. Not one word of the rest of the song. Monique keeps playing while I stand, twisting the Kleenex in my hands--my face red, my mind completely blank. The show must go. She's a real professional.

Finally, after ten or twelve bars, I motion for her to stop. She doesn't see me and, so, keeps playing. Then I step away from the microphone.

Monique, I say. *Please.*

The organ music stops.

I'm sorry, I say into the microphone. My voice fills the cathedral. I'm sorry. I can't remember the words.

Two hundred, three hundred faces turn to stare at me. Mom and Yolande whisper to each other, the nuns fidget in their pews. Father Levasseur, frowning, starts to get up from his chair at the very front of the church--to take over, I suppose. But I go on. I have to. I owe it to Sister Maria.

I hope you understand, I say to the crowd. I think that Sister Maria would understand.

With the mention of Sister Maria's name, the church falls still and silent. Mom and Yolande stop whispering, the nuns quietly clasp their hands together across their laps. Though Father Levasseur looks absolutely mortified, he returns to his chair. He glares at me while he sits.

In fact, I continue, I'm sure that Sister Maria would understand.

My voice trembles a little and my nose starts to drop. I stop to blow my nose into the red hanky, get a hold of myself. Pull myself together. As I return to the microphone, an idea comes to me--why didn't I think of it before?--and, with the idea, a feeling of calm. Utter calm. As though the crowd and the casket and the flowers have receded far into the distance, as though Father Levasseur has melted into the stained glass windows. I can almost feel Sister Maria behind me, nodding her encouragement; I can almost hear her voice. As if this is just another piano lesson, just another hour with her.

I say nothing by way of an introduction. The song needs no introduction, really. It's sad and slow and solemn--the traditional Ukrainian funeral song, *Vichnaia pam'iat.* Maybe the idea comes from her, maybe it's what she wants--to have it sung for her. Though I've heard it a few times, I've never actually sung it myself. This is my first time. Monique can't play along, of course, because she doesn't know how. None of the crowd can sing along--though they're supposed to, traditionally--for they don't know how either.

It doesn't sound right, one voice singing *Vichnaia pam'iat.* Everyone should be singing--men and women, little kids--everyone. One voice. It just doesn't sound right but I go on.

Dad must think the same thing--that it doesn't sound right with one voice--because before long I hear him join in. I hear his voice, an octave lower than mine, strong and deep. I glance over my shoulder. He is standing up with his hands clasped in front of him and his mouth open wide. Then I see my mother rise and I see her lips moving, too. She sings softly, in perfect harmony to Dad and me. We are the only three people in the cathedral who are standing and who are singing.

Together, we sing the words to the song--*Vichnaia pam'iat*--the same words, over and over again. *Vichnaia pam'iat.* And because I am not singing alone, I am free to weep. When my voice falters and breaks, their voices fill the cathedral. *Vichnaia pam'iat, Vichnaia pam'iat. In everlasting memory* of Sister Maria.

In everlasting memory

In everlasting memory

In ever lasting memory.

***

Colleen, it's your dad calling. Give us a call back as soon as you get this message, OK? Bye now.

Colleen? Dad here. It's, uh, just after three o'clock our time--must be about supper time for you. Call us. We'll be home most of the evening. Ba-bye.

Just Dad again. I'll try again later.

Hello? Colleenchick? This is your mother--

I pick up the answering machine and pull, yanking the cord from the wall to make the voices stop. Then I grab for my cigarettes. *Colleenchick.* My mother hasn't called me that in years.

I brush cigarette ashes from the Yellow Pages in front of me. The phone rings again and I ignore it. Why are they calling now? Why--when I have no time to talk, when I have things to do, plans to draw up, lists to make. Timelines to construct. This is what I've been lacking: organization, goals, priorities--and a positive attitude.

I pick up a copy of my résumé and, turning it around, I start writing on the back of it. *Things To Do. Find new apartment--Bloor Street West. Get day job--Ukrainian gift shops. Get gigs.* The phone stops ringing. *Pay bills--rent (old apartment), telephone, utilities, deposit (new apartment).* I scratch out the list of bills. Looking at the list of expenses laid out like that--it's too daunting. Positive, positive. Underneath *pay bills*, I write, *Stay positive!!* At the bottom of the list, I set a date for the completion of *Things To Do. End of week.* No, that gives me three days--forget it. *End of month.* That's better. That gives me ten days, plenty of time. Plus the end of the month coincides with my birthday--my twentieth birthday. A milestone, really. The end of my teenaged years, the beginning of a new decade in my a life--a new era. Perfect. The birth of a new Colleen.

Then it occurs to me--the reason Mom and Dad are calling. My birthday, of course. They must be planning for my present; they want to know what to send. I should've picked up the phone. I'll ask for money--no specific amount, just money. They won't send less than a hundred, possibly two hundred. I start a new list. *Finances:*

Revenue and Expenses. Under *Revenue* I write *Money in bank--$74.00*. Actually, there's $74.38, but I round down. *Birthday money--$200.00 (more or less)*. Just as I am about to list *Expenses*, the phone rings. *Yes*! I cross my fingers for two fifty.

Dad asks where I've been. He says that he and Mom have been calling and calling. Mom pipes in on the extension. She says that they were starting to worry. Where was I? Why wasn't I answering my phone?

I launch into my usual story--about working long hours at the coffee shop and gigging non-stop in the evenings. Which isn't entirely a lie, since I'll be doing all of these things in ten days or so. With my list in front of me--my new plan, my new attitude--I feel upbeat, optimistic.

Dad chuckles. That's my girl, he says. I guess your mother and I should start looking for your CD in the record stores soon.

I feel a twinge of guilt, a vague trace of nausea, but I keep on with the story. Yup, I say. Soon enough. Then I change the subject. How are things at home? How's the family? How's Sophie? How's Wes?

Well, says Dad. Actually. That's why we're calling. He pauses. You know we don't want to give you bad news over the phone. But--we've. Well.

Dad clears his throat.

My heart stops. I'm sure of it. It stops beating altogether and jumps to my throat. I reach for a cigarette but my hands shake too violently for me to light it. I drop the cigarette on my list, on the words, *Stay positive!!*

Mom? says Dad. You want to tell her?

Mom cuts in. Her voice sounds frail and far-away. No, no, Dad, she says. You go ahead.

I should ask what's happened but I can't speak. Someone is sick, dying? There's been an accident, a death? I should ask which one--Sophie, Wes. Which would be worse? In the split second before Dad speaks again, I see my brother before me--his wide, wet eyes, long-lashed and grey. I see my sister, her mouth opening into a bright white gash--*zube*!--across her face.

Sophie's fine, says Dad. Sophie's just fine. Wes, too. They're fine, good. Same as always.

My heart is ready to burst and my tongue is freed. Thank God, I say. Thank God, thank *God*. What is it then? I ask. Is it you, Dad? Mom? Are you OK?

It's Kalyna, says Dad, sighing. Your cousin Kalyna, Mary-and-Andy's girl. They found her this morning way on the outskirts of Vegreville. South of the *pysanka*.

Mom interrupts. You know, the big *pysanka* in Vegreville.

What do you mean--*found* her? Who's *they*? Who found her?

The police, says Dad. They think she must have wandered away from the house some time last night--Mary and Andy didn't even know she was gone. You know Kalyna. She was always disappearing.

What do you mean--*was*? I ask. Is she--are you saying that she's--

Dad sighs again, I can hear Mom sniffling.

Colleen, says Dad, she didn't bring a coat with her. God knows what she was thinking, God knows if she thinks--if she thought--at all. This time of year. Well. I don't need to tell you. It gets down to minus ten, minus fifteen at night. She must've gotten lost--disoriented--then hypothermia set in. She just curled up on the ground and went to sleep.

I can hear Mom blowing her nose in the background, then she hangs up the extension. Dad covers the receiver for a moment and there are muffled sounds, muffled voices.

Dad uncovers the phone. Now, he says, I don't know how flexible your schedule is over the next few days. We're guessing--he covers the receiver again--we're guessing the end of the week. Prayer service on Friday evening, funeral on Saturday.

I circle the scratched-out words *End of the week* on the list in front of me.

And we're also guessing, says Dad, that your Auntie Mary will ask you to sing at the prayer service or the funeral. Dad pauses. Possibly both. He pauses again. What do you think?

God, Dad. I don't know--you know, about getting a flight at the last minute. And, and--my--shifts, at work. Plus gigs. And the money for the ticket and everything.

While I lie, I trace the *$74.00* on the list in front of me over and over again.

Hang on, now, says Dad. Your mother wants to talk to you.

I was thinking *Ave Maria*, says Mom. Sophie will accompany you, I've already talked to her about--

Whoah, I say. Whoah! Mom, I don't know if I can get out there in time. It's short notice--and, you know, the money for the flight and everything. A last-minute flight like that could--

We'll pay, says Mom. There's no question, we'll pay. Dad can wire you the money first thing in the morning. I have the number right here for Air Canada. Where is it, now. Dad? Where's the number for Air Canada?

Of course. This shouldn't surprise me. I should have foreseen this. Mom continues. She has the flight number, the departure time, the arrival time--she's all but booked the flight, Toronto to Edmonton. After she has given me all the particulars, she tells me the price--two prices actually. The return air fare and the one-way.

One-way is cheaper, you know, says Mom. Not much, but it's cheaper. Maybe we should just book the ticket from here. Then we wouldn't have to bother wiring the money.

Mom passes the phone back to Dad.

You know that Kalyna loved music, says Dad, especially your singing. Remember how she'd sit and listen to you--her hands folded just so on her lap, her eyes fixed on you? Quiet as a mouse she'd sit.

While Dad talks, I see Kalyna perched at the edge of the armchair in our basement, her head bobbing up and down, side to side, in perfect time with the music. Kalyna--who wore funny dresses and plastic corsages and flip-flops in summer and in winter, who carried plastic Safeway bags filled with her favourite knickknacks and keepsakes. Who had to take pills every day--pills pushed secretly into bananas because she refused to swallow them with water. Who forgot my name from time to time. Who never stopped muttering and mumbling and humming to herself, except when she heard music. When she heard music, then she *raised* her voice--sang loud and clear, sometimes at the top of her lungs. Kalyna was crazy about music and she was never quiet and she never, *never* sat still. Kalyna. My crazy cousin Kalyna.

Well, I say. If I do come home for the funeral, I'm not singing *Ave Maria*. I'll choose a Ukrainian song, if anything. Kalyna loved Ukrainian songs.

After we've said our goodbyes, hung up our phones, I sit staring at my *Things To Do* list. It seems ridiculous to me, now. All of it, ridiculous. *Finances, Revenue, Expenses*. The numbers that I've written next to *Birthday Money*. And my cousin Kalyna, shivering next to a giant *pysanka*, rocking herself to sleep in a snow bank without a coat, without a blanket. What does it matter if I sing for her now?

Part Three

Swaziland

You must be Colleen!

At my scholarship interview, a girl meets me outside the doors of the office building in downtown Edmonton. She is Barbie Christianson, a recent alumnus of the Lester B. Pearson United World College of the Pacific near Victoria, British Columbia.

While Barbie tells me about herself, she locks my hand into a death grip, then pumps it with all her might. My fingers are tingling by the time she's finished shaking my hand. She looks like a barbie--tall, thin, tanned. No make-up, blond hair swept off her forehead and pulled into a single braid down her back. Barbie's never had a zit in her life, I can tell. My face, on the other hand, is a whole other story. It broke out the day of Sister Maria's funeral. I've got a constellation of pimples across my chin and the North Star on the tip of my nose.

Coffee, decaf or regular. Tea, juice, water--help yourself, says Barbie, as she leads me into the office lounge.

There are doughnuts and muffins on a coffee table in the centre of the room--a fruit tray, too, plus a plate covered in tiny triangular sandwiches arranged in a circle with sprigs of parsley for garnish and radishes carved into the shape of roses. The sight of food makes me nauseous. Mom and Dad and I stopped at McDonald's for lunch. Big Mac, large fries, vanilla shake--I hardly got it all down before I threw it all up again. The taste of vomit--of nerves--still lingers in my throat.

At the far end of the lounge, a couple and their daughter are seated around a TV set and a VCR. Barbie tells me that they're watching the latest UWC promo video, shot at various locations around the world. That's Vanessa, says Barbie, pointing to the daughter. She's a candidate, just like you! Barbie smiles a flawless barbie smile.

Vanessa waves to me from across the room.

Super person, Barbie whispers. And super parents. Just *super*. So supportive! Are your parents parking their car or something? she asks. I nod.

Mom and Dad dropped me off so that they could hit a few malls during my interview. We're meeting at the Eaton Centre in two hours.

Barbie joins Vanessa's parents as they finish watching the promo video. Vanessa bounces over to me.

I'm, like, *so* glad, says Vanessa, that someone else decided to wear shorts! I was, like, *so* worried that I was, you know, under-dressed or something! She giggles.

Vanessa's shorts are cream-coloured silk with gold threads woven into the fabric. Her blouse is gold-coloured silk with gold buttons. All of her accessories are gold. There are gold sandals on her feet, a gold bracelet on her wrist, a thick gold chain around her neck, gold tear-drop earrings on her ears. My shorts suit wrinkled on the car-ride from St. Paul. I've got a long, dark stain on the collar of my blouse where I dropped a piece of lettuce covered in Big Mac sauce. I want to tell Vanessa that she is, like, *so* full of it.

To get away from Vanessa, I wander toward the coffee urn. She follows. Oh my God, she says. I, like, *so* admire you for drinking coffee now. I'm *so* nervous--coffee would, like, *totally* put me over the edge.

I try to block out the sound of Vanessa's voice. Her mannerisms might rub off on me. I take my coffee to a chair in the corner--a good place, I think, to tune my guitar, run through the words to the song I'm going to sing. I've brought a lyric sheet with me so that there is no repeat of my performance at Sister Maria's funeral.

Vanessa is about to plop herself into a chair next to mine when her name is called. She gives a little yelp, her parents dash across the room to embrace her. Vanessa says, Oh my God! In unison, her parents say, This is it! They hug, they kiss. They hug again.

I try to concentrate on opening my guitar case. But Vanessa runs over to me, gives my shoulder a poke. Wish me luck! she says.

You, like, *totally* don't need luck, I say. You're going to be, like, *so* awesome.

I am about to take my guitar out of its case when another girl enters the lounge--another candidate, another set of parents. The girl looks like she's ready to attend a wedding--hair pinned up in a French twist, long green dress, spiky green heels. Her parents are dressed no differently. The father wears a double-breasted suit--dark grey with a royal blue tie and a puff of royal blue in his breast pocket; the mother wears a matching royal blue suit, short and sleek, with dark grey gloves and a dark grey hat. Maybe it's a good thing that my parents didn't come with me. They drove to Edmonton today in cut-off denim shorts and T-shirts. My dad hates suits. My mother doesn't own a hat.

The girl says that her name is Caroline Thompson. Barbie races across the room to meet her. Another musician! says Barbie.

Caroline has a violin case in her hand.

I'll leave you two alone, Barbie says, so that you can talk music!

Caroline looks down at my guitar sitting in its case. The body of the guitar is covered with stickers--CFCW RADIO, Kehiwin First Nations, Jesus is Lord. It used to belong to an Indian guy, a gospel singer from Bonnyville; Dad bought it at a pawn shop for fifty bucks. Caroline's violin case is soft-shell--black leather with a long leather shoulder strap. Several *Air Canada* luggage tags hang from the shoulder strap.

I snap my guitar case shut.

So, you play the fiddle? I ask.

I'm joking, of course. I'm just making conversation. Breaking the ice.

Violin, says Caroline, correcting me. I'm section leader for the Alberta Youth Orchestra and the Western Canadian Youth Orchestra. I also conduct two youth chamber groups and play in one professional chamber ensemble.

Oh, I say, trying very hard to be friendly. Wow. That's--wow. Doesn't get much better than that, does it?

Actually, Caroline replies, I've been invited to play with the International Youth Orchestra four times--once in Berlin, once in Moscow, once in Stockholm, once in Peking. This year, we're meeting in Mexico City.

Egomaniac, I think. Braggart. But I try to come up with a nicer remark.

That must be exciting for you, I say. Mexico City. What a change from Edmonton.

Actually, says Caroline, I'm from Calgary. And Mexico is home to me as well. My family and I have summered on the Yucatan Peninsula since I was a child. I speak fluent Spanish--which was easy to learn with my background in French. I go to a French immersion school.

Summered on the Yucatan Peninsula. Summered on the Yucatan Peninsula. How can I compete with that? My stomach turns. I excuse myself politely from Caroline, then make my way to the bathroom as nonchalantly as possible. I have to throw up again.

Dry heaves. There's nothing left to vomit. I should leave now, Mom was right. I don't have a chance. I'm out of my league--way out. I press my face against the toilet bowl. Berlin, Moscow, Stockholm, Peking. I've hardly been out of Alberta, let alone overseas. I'm not sure that I'm fluent in one language, let alone two. Let alone three.

I'm still at the toilet bowl when Vanessa and her mother walk into the bathroom. Everything, Mom! says Vanessa. I could answer, like, *everything* they asked. They asked me a bunch of questions about multiculturalism and what is Canada and stuff--that was easy. Then there was this big question about crime and criminals and what I think of extradition and countries that use capital punishment and, like, you know how we had that debate on the death penalty in social studies last semester? Well I just recited, like, everything our team came up with and I'm just totally sure it was exactly what they wanted to hear, you know, about the *sanctity* of human life and the *futility* of an eye-for-and-eye and all that. It was a total dream interview, Vanessa says. A total dream.

As Vanessa and her mother slip into their respective bathroom stalls, I slip out of the bathroom altogether. I'm going to grab my guitar and get out. We don't have debates in social studies. We've never talked about capital punishment. Extradition? I have no clue what the word means.

Barbie meets me in the corridor outside the bathroom. You're up next! she says, pulling me into the lounge. You've only got twenty minutes with them. Make every word count.

I feel dizzy.

Don't worry, though! Barbie puts her arm around me and squeezes. Just relax and be yourself! she says. The committee will call on you when they're ready.

Barbie joins Vanessa's Dad and Caroline's parents and Caroline on the other side of the room. Caroline is in the centre of the group talking about herself--I can hear her. She's describing her volunteer work with AIDS victims and homeless teenagers and heroine addicts. Are there heroine addicts in St. Paul? I wonder. I've volunteered at bingos for the Ukrainian dance club, to raise money for our trips to festivals. That's it, the extent of my volunteer work. Bingo.

The interview room is long and rectangular; it's done in pastel colours. A pastel blue carpet, pastel blue and pink chairs--high-backed, plush chairs that swivel--and pastel pink vertical blinds on the windows. Hanging on one wall is a pastel pink print of coral and seashells and, on the other wall, a matching pastel blue print of the ocean. The room is filled by a long table, and faces. Six faces, six people, each with a pastel pink name tag. Tim Van Leuwen, the committee chairperson, extends his hand. He's balding. The top of his head, I notice, is pale pink. It matches the decor.

Tim takes me around the table, introducing me to the other committee members one by one.

Craig Jefferson, Immigration Canada. Pacific College Alumnus.

J.J. Bowers, physiotherapist, University of Alberta Hospital. Pacific College Alumnus.

Gena Fontaine, Alberta Teachers' Association. Pacific College Alumnus.

Genevieve Beauchamps, Director of Marketing, PETA. Atlantic College Alumnus.

Vincent Whiskeyjack, Native Counseling Services of Alberta. Atlantic College Alumnus.

Three women, three men. The committee is perfectly symmetrical. They even sit symmetrically--boy girl, boy girl, boy girl. Half have attended the Pacific UWC in British Columbia, the other half, the Atlantic College in Wales. There are no alumni of the Adriatic UWC in Italy or the College of the American West in New Mexico. No representative from the Southeast Asia UWC in Singapore. No one from the Southern Africa UWC in Swaziland. Maybe they only send students to British Columbia and Wales. What a disappointment. I want to ask questions about the college in Africa--I want to hear all about it, I want to go to it.

There is no small talk. No *Hello*, no *How are you today*, nothing. The committee goes straight into the questions.

It's standard procedure, says Tim, for us to begin by asking each candidate to explain his or her response to question 2.2(a) on the United World Colleges application form.

Question 2.2(a)? My palms start to sweat.

In your case, Colleen--Craig takes a turn at speaking--we're particularly interested in the way you chose to answer 2.2(a).

Craig has short, spiky hair. He's tanned, broad-shouldered. Well-built. The opposite of Tim, with his shiny head and his scrawny neck and his white-blue complexion.

I try to visualize the application form--2.2.(a), 2.2(a). It's been three months--maybe more--since I filled out the application. Even if I could remember the question, I'm not sure that I could remember how I answered it.

I don't quite recall question 2.2.(a), I say. Could you refresh my memory, please?

Tim and Craig exchange glances. This, I think, is a test. A test of my memory. And I'm failing--failing miserably.

Tim clears his throat. The question, he says, asked that you rank the colleges from one to six according to your personal preferences: one being your first choice, six being your last. On your application--he sighs, sifts through a stack of papers--you failed to rank the colleges altogether.

Tim pushes my application toward me; I pick it up, my hands shaking. My response to question 2.2.(a) has been highlighted in bright yellow. Now I remember. Instead of ranking the colleges, I simply marked my first choice. I circled the college in southern Africa. I drew tiny stars all around it. I placed an enormous number one beside the words Waterford-Kamhlaba United World College of Southern Africa.

We would be less than honest, says Craig, if we didn't communicate to you the degree to which your application form--particularly, your response to question 2.2(a)--stands out as *unusual* among the other candidates' application forms.

All of our other applicants completed the question *as asked*, says Tim.

That is to say, says Craig, they ranked the colleges from one to six.

And almost entirely without exception, says Tim, they relegated Waterford-Kamhlaba to the bottom of their list.

Craig interrupts. You should know, Colleen, that we don't--as a rule--send students on scholarship to Swaziland. I imagine that--given your obvious interest in Waterford-Kamhlaba--it must be disappointing for you to hear this now. Perhaps your guidance counselor or your teacher--whoever passed the application on to you--perhaps that person wasn't aware of our policy?

The region is too volatile, says Tim. He leans back in his chair, crosses his arms behind his head. While he speaks, he rubs the top of his pink head. Political upheaval, he says. Civil unrest, violence. With the potential dismantling of the apartheid regime by militant black factions and makeshift guerrilla groups, it's simply not in the best interest of our committee--

--or our candidates, says Craig--

--to involve ourselves with the college in southern Africa. It's too dangerous. Tim pauses. Dangerous, he repeats. Danger is the bottom line here.

You don't know that, I say.

The tone of my voice surprises me--it's solid, confident.

Tim says, Pardon?

You don't know that, I repeat. You don't know what's going on in South Africa--how could you? You haven't been there and you haven't sent any students there.

The more I talk, the more assertive I become. My hands stop trembling, my stomach settles. It's like being on stage, like a performance.

All you know, I continue, is what you read in the newspapers. And what you hear on TV. Do you believe everything the media tell you? I don't. The media are in the business of sensationalism. Selling papers, high ratings--that's their business. And I, for one, won't settle for it. I want to know what's really going on in the world. I want to see apartheid first hand, all of it. If you're worried about the danger, give me a waiver--something that says the committee won't be held responsible for any harm that might come to me. I'll sign it, no problem. I'll sign it right now, if you want.

Another man on the committee speaks for the first time. His name tag says Vincent. He's a big Native man with a beaded watchband and a beaded choker. He says, What we're asking is that you select another college, keeping in mind the fact that Waterford-Kamhlaba is really out of the question.

I've read about the other colleges and they all sound wonderful, I say. Don't get me wrong. They sound beautiful. The campuses in New Mexico and Wales are both built around castles. Pacific College in Victoria is surrounded by the ocean. But I've also read in your scholarship literature that when scholarship recipients have completed their two years at a United World College, they're obliged to return to their communities--to their hometowns--and to share what they've learned from the United World College experience.

I hope that Vincent is listening carefully. I want him on my side.

Waterford-Kamhlaba interests me because it was the first multi-racial school in southern Africa. It was designed to challenge the apartheid system--to show young people that it's possible for individuals of all races to live and learn and work together. As you know, the apartheid system--the system that segregates black people into homelands--it was modeled on Canadian Indian Reservations.

Vincent raises one eyebrow, slightly.

My hometown, I continue, is St. Paul. And St. Paul is surrounded by five Reservations. Saddle Lake, Frog Lake, Kehiwin. Good Fish, Fishing Lake. We've got our own apartheid happening right here, right now. It seems to me that if South Africa learned about apartheid from us, who's to say that we can't learn from South Africa how to dismantle apartheid?

For a moment, nobody speaks.

For me, I say, it's Swaziland or bust.

Vincent grins.

Thank you, says Tim, pursing his lips. I think that's enough. We can move on to the next question. Gena?

Gena's hair is curly and red, her face is pale and freckled, her fingernails are long, painted red. She says, If a--if a *Swazi* student, let's say, were to ask you what it means to be Canadian, what would you say?

I pause, wondering how I should answer.

Finish this sentence, says Gena. "My country, Canada, is--"

The Rocky Mountains, I reply.
Canada is Prince Edward Island
Canada is the prairie cowboy
Canada is the Yukon miner

Without thinking, I've recited the lines of a song that we sang once in the sixth grade, in music class. *Canada Is*. I wonder if anyone on the committee knows the song.

Unfortunately, the rest of the words to the song won't do--*we have love for our neighbours, of whatever creed or colour, we have peace in our cities and our boundaries have no chains*--not after the scathing critique of Canada's apartheid that I just delivered.

I make up a few verses of my own. What have I got to lose?

Canada is fresh maple syrup
Canada is red-coated Mounties
Canada is the boreal beaver
And the bison and the loon

My answer is sappy, I know. Sap-*py*. I've never actually tasted real maple syrup. We buy Aunt Jemima's, it's cheaper. The RCMP haven't worn red for years. Gena looks touched, though. *Moved* even. So I continue.

Canada is the Native Pow-Wow
Canada is the Stanley Cup Play-offs
Canada is Farley Mowat,
Peter Gzowski and Alfred Sung

Tim tries to cut in once or twice. I ignore him. I'm on a roll.

Canada is the Shi'ite Moslem
Canada is the East Coast schooner
Canada is the Saskatchewan farmer
And the oilman and the--

Great, says Tim. That's great. Moving right along, then. We've got to keep our eye on the clock. J.J.? You go ahead.

Damn it. I'm not finished. I wanted to say something about the Quebecois language and Maritime folk music and Hibernia and the midnight sun in the Northwest Territories.

As Tim mentioned, J.J. says, I'm a physiotherapist at the University Hospital in Edmonton. My primary interest is in body consciousness: healthy eating, physical fitness, active lifestyles.

It doesn't look to me as though J.J. is interested in healthy eating--it doesn't look like she's interested in eating at all. The skin on her face is stretched tight across her cheekbones and eye sockets. She wears a sleeveless shirt so I can see her arms, thin and sinewy, blue-green veins bulging down the length of her forearms and across the backs of her hands. I think she's overdone it with the physical fitness and the active lifestyle. She looks anorexic.

I'd like you, says J.J., to elaborate on your involvement in sports: team sports and individual sports.

I could lie. I probably should. Make something up about running, aerobics. Volleyball, tennis, badminton. I could play the part--jock, fitness freak. Sports fanatic. J.J. would never know the difference, I'm not wearing a sleeveless shirt. But what if they send me to a jock college? I've heard that the college in Victoria specializes in water sports--sailing and swimming and ocean kayaking. They do rock-climbing in Wales, cricket in Singapore. I'd never make it at one of those colleges.

I have to be honest, I say. I'm not really one for sports--organized or individual. In fact. No. That's an understatement. I hate sports. I always have.

J.J. gasps.

I've never tried out for the school volleyball team, basketball team, field hockey team. Never played after-school sports, like softball or soccer. Wait--no--that's not true.

My parents signed me up for T-Ball one year. You know the game? I ask. It's sort of a tiny tots' version of softball.

Gena nods. Craig nods.

The coach never played me. He said that I wasn't aggressive enough. I pause. So, I suppose that set a precedent in my life. Ten years of phys. ed. classes and not once--ever--did I break a sweat. Never. I don't think it makes me a bad person, really. In fact, sports just aren't for everyone--and that's all right, in my opinion. For me, it's the competition that I can't stand. I mean--imagine. We're playing floor hockey in phys. ed. and my best friend is the goal-tender on the other team. Now, why would I want to go and score on her? She's my best friend. I'm not going to shoot at my best friend! And let's say, at the same time, there's my *other* best friend, also on the other team, and she's playing left wing and she loves to score. Scoring means everything to her--and she's good at it, too. Why not pass her the puck and let her score? Scoring doesn't mean a thing to me.

J.J. looks at me as though I've lost my mind.

You're telling me, she says, that you have never engaged in any cardio-vascular activity? You've never worked out? You've never--perspired?

Oh no, I reply. No, no! I've perspired lots of times--just not in phys. ed. In Ukrainian dancing I get completely drenched. I've Ukrainian danced twice a week, all my life. It's a really solid workout. But, technically speaking, Ukrainian dancing isn't a sport. You asked me about sports.

I try not to look smug. J.J. turns to Genevieve, shaking her head. Your witness, she says.

Genevieve says, I want to pick up on something that you mentioned when you were talking about Canada.

Genevieve, I notice, has a strong Quebecois accent. She emphasizes the wrong syllable of nearly every word.

You talked about the *beaVER*, she says, in *relaTION* to *CanaDA*. You know, many of our students--past and present--are actively involved in the protection of endangered animal species. A lot of us, Genevieve says, are strict vegetarians. Me, I've personally made a career of animal rights, she says, working with PETA, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

I look around the room at the other committee members. Gena has set her pencil down; Vincent and Craig have crossed their arms over their chests. Tim interrupts Genevieve, asking if she could perhaps get to her question.

Could you tell us about your interest *in* and your experiences *with* animal rights activism? says Genevieve.

Animal rights activism, I repeat. That's a tough one. I pause.

Tough one, *my ass*. This is the easiest question yet. Genevieve wants to hear that I volunteer at the SPCA with abused pets, that I write letters protesting the sale of ivory. That I spray paint on rich women's fur coats. She straightens her back, lifts her chin. As though she's really made me think, challenged me--stumped me, even. I glance down at Genevieve's legs and feet beside me. Her calves are hairy, unshaven; she wears brown

Birkenstock sandals and grey woolen socks and small round glasses with plastic tortoise shell frames. People like Genevieve bother me. They're fakes, frauds. *Hypocrites*. I don't think that I can do it--play into her hand, tell her what I know that she wants to hear. I can't and I *won't*.

I'll be straight with you, I say. I grew up on a farm. I can't count how many gophers I've shot in my lifetime.

The blood drains from Genevieve's face. Prairie dogs? she says. You must be joking. It sounds like *jokING*.

No, I say. No, I'm not joking. I'm serious. I mean--don't get me wrong. I'm all for animal rights, no doubt about that. I would never sanction senseless cruelty to animals--no way. Gophers, though. They spell trouble for farmers. Gophers are big-time pests, they destroy crops; cows break legs because of gopher-holes.

And farmers' fields are more important than animal habitats? *'AbiTATS*.

Let me put it this way. If I had to choose between human life and animal life, I'd choose humans. Take lab animals, for example. Mice, rats, rabbits. Scientists need to use them in their research, to make medical advances. If we need to sacrifice a few rats to save human lives, so be it.

So be it? Genevieve snorts. Obviously you have no idea what goes on in scientific laboratories to these animals. They are slaughterhouses.

Like the place where cows are killed to make leather--I point to Genevieve's sandals--for your footwear?

The blood rushes back to Genevieve's face. She looks embarrassed but I'm not backing down now.

I explain, then, that some animal rights activists seem to be selective about the animal lives that they fight for. Mice and rabbits are cute and cuddly, they deserve to live. Cows are ugly, big-nosed beasts, they deserve to die. Where's the logic? I ask.

By my logic, says Genevieve, *all* animals have the right to live--

And the right to die, I say, interrupting her. Killing isn't synonymous with cruelty. Not to my mind. Have you ever taken a walk in the bush in northern Alberta in the spring?

Genevieve stares me straight in the eye.

I have, I say. I've seen half-rotted deer carcasses--*fourteen*, once, all around the same spot--their undersides all red and raw and bloody. We're over-populated with deer, you know, and when there's not enough food for them in the winter, in the bush, they head out to open meadows to get at the grain under the snow. Except that there's this hard, icy crust over the fields and it scrapes the fur off their bellies. They don't usually get to the point of starvation. They freeze to death first, bleed to death sometimes.

Craig leans forward, listening; Gena's brow is furrowed.

What are you suggesting? Genevieve raises her voice. What are you saying exactly? That we kill all the deer in the world? Come on!

Not all the deer, I say, careful to keep my cool. I'm saying that killing--culling--is necessary sometimes. I come from a hunting family. My dad and my brother, Wes--they hunt. I'm not much of a big-game hunter myself but my sister Sophie is into bow-hunting.

The point is, we all grew up on deer meat. Deer meat and moose, sometimes elk. There's a friend of my dad's at Saddle Lake--one of the Reserves--he gets the hides and the antlers and some of the meat from us. We've got freezers full of meat. I don't think it's cruel, I think it's humane. I think it's natural.

Tim cuts in, saying that we're going to run out of time if we don't get to Vincent's question; he asks Genevieve if she has anything to add. She keeps her head down as she furiously makes notes on the paper in front of her. Nothing to add, she says. Then she glances up at me, glaring.

For the final portion of the interview, says Vincent, handing me a piece of paper dotted sparsely with typewritten words, we want you to look at these three questions. Take a minute. Read through the questions carefully. Choose the question, he says, that you feel best prepared to answer. Vincent smiles. One of his front teeth is capped with gold.

I start to read the questions.

1. *Should Canada extradite criminals to countries for which the death penalty is law?*

There it is. The word. *Extradite*. From the context of the sentence, I can figure out what it means: export, deport--force to leave, basically. I don't think that the committee actually cares much about the extradition issue. They want to know my feelings about capital punishment. Touchy subject, emotional. I've already offended Genevieve about animal rights, I think that I'd better stay away from question one.

Whenever you're ready, says Vincent. He grins again, then swings one of his braids across his shoulder. Vincent's got two braids; pieces of leather have been woven into both of them.

> 2. *Give a brief explanation of the Meech Lake Accord and the controversy surrounding Meech Lake in contemporary Canadian political affairs.*

Meech Lake. It's been in the papers and on the news every day for the last few months. The problem is, I haven't been able to sort Meech Lake out--it's like the troubles with the IRA in Ireland, or the PLO in the Middle East. Messy. Meech Lake, I think, has something to do with Québec--or is it Native people? Maybe both, I can't be sure. Regardless, there is an expert in front of me--Genevieve or Vincent. Probably it's best to stay away from Meech Lake altogether.

All set? says Vincent, drumming his fingers on the table. He's still grinning. I shake my head. I think he's enjoying this--watching me squirm.

> 3. *Define genocide. Provide an example. What punishment, in your opinion, is appropriate for perpetrators of genocidal crimes?*

This could be the one. Genocide is mass murder. Example: World War II, Hitler. The Jews. Simple. As for the punishment--piece of cake. "An eye for an eye," that's how Jews would want it. The Old Testament way.

I'm about to open my mouth when it occurs to me that Vanessa argued *against* "an eye for an eye"--she told her mom all about it in the ladies' washroom. Maybe I should argue against it too. Of course, either way, I'm opening up the discussion to capital punishment. I try to think of a better example of genocide, one that won't lead to the death penalty issue. The Beothuck in Newfoundland. Perfect. Their genocide happened so long ago that there's no one left to punish anymore. Punishment is a non-issue. It's just a terrible tragedy, a horrific chapter in Canadian history. The End.

And if Vincent asks me for details about the Beothuck people? He's Native, he must know all about them. I know that they lived in Newfoundland. Or New Brunswick. Nova Scotia maybe? They were killed in the 1800s, I know that. Or maybe in the 1700s. By whom? I wonder. The French or the English?

Anytime now! says Vincent, gold tooth shining.

All right, I say. I'll take the genocide question, number three.

Still unsure of how to proceed, I swivel back and forth--left to right--in my chair. My foot bumps up against the guitar case beside me. My guitar. I'd forgotten about it.

I've got to sing for them. It would look silly--ridiculous, actually--if I lugged my guitar all the way here and then did nothing with it. The song that I planned to sing won't do, won't fit. I try to run through my song list in my mind, searching for a genocide song. Nothing comes to me. Then I start talking--I can't delay much longer--hoping that a song idea will come to me as I speak.

Genocide, I say, is the wholesale annihilation of a group of people for religious or political reasons. The Jews in World War II, for instance--well, Hitler's campaign against them, I should say--that's genocide. Or the Beothuck people of--of eastern Canada, who were wiped out completely by the--um--European invaders. That's genocide.

I pause to think of a song. There is always, I think, the song that I wrote for the persecution of Tibetans by the Chinese. I wonder, though--is that genocide? I wish that I'd done better research.

Actually, I continue, all Native peoples in Canada and the United States were victims of genocide. They still *are* victims--when you think about it--of an ongoing genocide, really.

I'm improvising now.

It's not that we're murdering our First Nations people outright. No, of course not. We're more subtle than that. We're perpetrators of a sort of *cultural* genocide.

Vincent should like this.

I reach down to my guitar case--now is the time for a song--then I start plucking broken minor chords. A long a minor arpeggio, a long d minor arpeggio--brief E seven and back to a minor. The chord progression is melancholy, plaintive. Mournful. I glance over at Vincent for approval, wishing that I'd thought more about Native people, that I'd written a whole song about their suffering. Vincent, I notice, has stopped grinning.

I'm plucking the same chords, trying to think of something to add, when it strikes me that the a minor, d minor, E seven progression is the chord structure of a hundred Ukrainian songs. I'm an expert on Ukrainian people.

Then again, I say, cultural genocide in Canada takes many different forms; it comes in different degrees. My own family--my people, the Ukrainians--we've experienced our own persecution over the last century. Culturally, I mean.

I change from plucking to strumming--softly, still--same chord progression.

When my parents and my aunts and my uncles were young--in the thirties and forties--they weren't permitted to speak Ukrainian at school. The teacher expected them to speak English but most of them didn't know *how*. Ukrainian was their mother tongue.

The teacher strapped them--beat them, sometimes--into speaking English; the other kids called them names. My parents and their generation, they grew up ashamed of who they were, of who their parents were. Ashamed of their food, their religion--everything. Their whole way of life. So they raised us to be English, thinking we wouldn't have to be ashamed, then. They gave us English names. They hardly ever spoke to us in Ukrainian.

For a moment, I stop playing my guitar. I haven't thought through what I'm saying but I have to keep on.

We've all taken Ukrainian dancing lessons, I say. My sister, my brother, me. At Easter time, we make *pysanky* and then we bring them for "Show-and-Tell." Ukrainian was even offered as a second language at school, for a while. Sometimes, though, I think--so what? I can't speak to my grandparents, they only speak Ukrainian. I can't read Ukrainian books, Ukrainian poetry--Ukrainian newspapers, magazines, recipes.

I start strumming again. This time through the chord progression, I sing along. I sing *Vichnaia pam'iat* just as I sang it for Sister Maria. The same words, over and over again. The same melody, slow and somber and dark. It's a repeat performance after all, though I'm singing alone this time. The committee members are still and silent while I sing. Craig nods in time with the music, Gena wipes her eyes.

When I've finished the song, when my guitar strings have stopped ringing, I look around the room at all the committee members. Do you know what the words mean? I ask.

Tim shakes his head; J.J. drops her eyes. Vincent says, No.

Vichnaia pam'iat means everlasting memory, I say. Memory everlasting. It's a song for the dying and the dead, a song for death. At least, that's what my mother tells me. I can't be sure, myself. I can sing dozens of Ukrainian songs--I memorize them phonetically. The funny thing is if you were to ask me what the words mean, I couldn't tell you. I don't know.

I put my guitar back into its case.

I don't know how we'd punish people for that kind of genocide, I say. I don't know where we'd begin--or where we'd end.

The interview ends with more hand-shaking--thank-you's and goodbye's and good lucks. As Tim escorts me to the door of the interview room, he says that the committee will make their decision within the next fourteen days. Successful candidates will be contacted by phone; others will receive letters in the mail. I try to get a feeling from him--about my interview, about my chances at a scholarship. He gives nothing away.

Waiting for the elevator to take me to the main floor of the office building, I hear Caroline warming up on her violin. She plays scales first, then arpeggios, then a complete piece--a concerto, probably--filled with sixteenth notes runs and trills. Caroline is very good, there's no doubt about that. She's twice--three times--the musician that I am, technically.

The elevator doors open. A father and his son--another candidate--emerge, both in suits and ties and shiny shoes. I wish the son luck as I get into the elevator.

Break a leg! I say, as the doors close.

And I hum to myself the whole way down.

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Uke Power! Honk If You Love Borshch. Kiss Me, I'm Ukrainian.

They're all the same. The same laminated bumper stickers, the same polyester T-shirts, the same tin buttons. Ukrainian Bookstores in Vegreville and Edmonton have been selling this stuff for years, for as long as I can remember. I feel like I'm at home--like I've come home. K-Tel records of Ukrainian polka music, ten-cent postcards of cartoon *kozaks* drinking and dancing around a cartoon bonfire. *Pysanky* greeting cards, mimeographed cookbooks--*Traditional Ukrainian Cookery*--and mass-produced sets of *Baba* dolls. I'd buy one of everything here in *Carpathia Arts*. If I could. If I had the money. One shellacked dough magnet in the shape of a dumpling, one hard-covered copy of *Taras Shevchenko: The Collected Works*. One sweatshirt--with a sketch on the front of two fiddle players in embroidered shirts and, beneath them, the words *Ukrainians Duet Better.*

In one corner of the store, perched on a ladder, pinning shirts on a cork display board is a woman. A middle-aged woman--forty-something. Trim hair--short and curly, grey-blond. She wears blue jeans and a white cotton blouse. Good morning! she says, waving to me from the top of the ladder. Have you seen these before? she says, holding up a sweatshirt.

On the front of the shirt is a perfect imitation of the *Roots Athletics* logo--except that the words are in the Cyrillic alphabet. It says Коріння Атлитика.

Kor-in-nya, says the woman, sounding out the first word on the shirt. She says that it means *Roots* in Ukrainian.

The woman has a slight accent, I notice--like Dad. And when she smiles, she looks a little like Mom--same wrinkled nose, same laugh-lines around the eyes. She says that her is name is Paraska and that if I need any help I should give her a shout. Paraska. She gives me a lump in my throat. I haven't heard a friendly voice in a long time.

I do need help--of course. I need a job. I haven't got the courage, though, to ask--not yet anyway. I wander around the store, browsing. Touching the odd piece of merchandise, the odd price tag. There are used blouses--hand-embroidered--all on for half-price, $74.99; two used Hutsul vests--hand-made--$199.99 a piece. I have one of each at home. I kick myself for leaving them behind. Then I tell myself that it would be blasphemy--utter blasphemy--to sell any piece of my dancing gear. *Baba* embroidered my blouses, after all. Mom made my Hutsul vest. What kind of Ukrainian pawns her costume to pay rent?

Toward the back of the store is a rack of used dancing boots--various colours and various sizes--each pair, $89.99. I have three pairs at home: red, black, and burgundy. I could sell one pair. What's one pair? I'd still have the other two. I could sell two pairs, save one. Why save them? I'll never wear them again. The black boots never fit properly in the first place.

Looking for anything in particular? Paraska appears behind me. She smells good--like fresh bread and dill weed. I want to keep her at my side so that I can breathe her in.

I need to find a book, I say. A songbook, actually. Small, yellow. I can't think of the title offhand--something like *Sing in Ukrainian* or *Let's Sing Ukrainian Songs*. I'll recognize it when I see it. We have two copies of it at home.

Where's home? says Paraska, leading me toward a bin filled with books in the centre of the store. A sign hangs over the bin: seventy per cent off.

St. Paul, I reply. St. Paul, *Alberta*.

St. Paul! she says, stopping in her tracks. You're kidding! My sister, Gena, lives in Vilna! Well, it's a small world after all!

As Paraska sifts through the books in the bin, she hums the tune to *It's A Small World*.

Zaspivaimo Sobi? she asks, lifting her head up from the bin.

I give her a blank look.

She holds up the songbook. *Let's Sing Out in Ukrainian*, she says. *Zaspivaimo Sobi*. This the one?

It's the one all right. I didn't know the Ukrainian title.

So, says Paraska, as we make approach the cash register at the front of the store. You're a long way from St. Paul, Alberta. Are you going to school here in Toronto?

This, I think, is my chance--my big chance to that I'm completely broke, desperate for a job. Lonely. Paraska will invite me to dinner, offer me a job--maybe she'll even help me find a new place to live.

Actually, I say, I'm trying to break into the music industry. There's not much happening in Alberta, so I thought I'd move here--you know, get a day job, play gigs in the evenings.

Paraska interrupts me. You sing? she says.

I nod.

In Ukrainian? she says.

Sometimes, I say.

No kidding, says Paraska, shaking her head. Well, now, it *is* a small world after all.

Paraska reaches behind the counter. She brings out a record--an *old* record, twenty years old at least. On the cover of the record is a photo of three girls--all in embroidered blouses, bee-hive hairdos, and pale pink lipstick. The title of the album is *The Ukraina Beat.*

This is my sister Gena, says Paraska, pointing to the girl on the left. This is my sister Olenka, she says, pointing to the girl on the right. And this is me. She points to the girl in the middle. We were an all-girl group: three-part harmony; accordion, bass, keyboards. Matching outfits, of course. We thought that we'd be like *The Supremes.* Paraska rolls her eyes. A Ukrainian version of *The Supremes*, that is.

I stare at the album cover. Paraska looks so thin, so young. Paraska, too, glances once more at the album before she puts it back beneath the counter.

I guess the market has improved now, she says, if you're making a living at singing in Ukrainian--we certainly couldn't.

Oh, I say. I don't sing *professionally* in Ukrainian. I'm buying the songbook for a funeral. I've got to sing for a funeral at home, in Alberta. The music that I do--*my* music--it's entirely English.

Paraska punches in my purchase. I take a deep breath for courage.

I don't suppose you could use anybody--any help, I mean--during the day? I ask. Part-time help, weekends and evenings. Something like that?

I'd love to hire you, says Paraska. Believe me. Some help around here would be nice. Unfortunately, I can't. I'm *giving* most of my books away. No one wants to buy Ukrainian books anymore. And records, T-shirts, pottery--you name it, it's the same story.

I tell Paraska, Thanks anyway. Just thought I'd ask.

Wait a second. Paraska pauses, leaning across the counter toward me. There *is* something I need, she says. It's a long shot, I know. A *really* long shot. But--what the heck? You don't make eggs by any chance, do you? You know, the fancy Easter eggs?

Pysanky, I say.

They sell like hot-cakes, says Paraska. My main supplier is a lady in Mississauga, Rose Rusnak. Her eggs are stunning. Gorgeous. She does chicken eggs, goose eggs, ostrich eggs--any sort of egg she can get her hands on. I pay her by the egg. Twenty-five for a basic design, thirty for a fairly complex job. Goose eggs run anywhere from forty to fifty-five. Ostrich eggs, one hundred and up.

I nod.

You wouldn't believe it, she says. People come here year-round to buy Mrs. Rusnak's eggs. They come from everywhere--Windsor, Peterborough, Ottawa. She has a big following here in Ontario.

I cross my arms, waiting for Paraska to make her point.

She also has arthritis.

I uncross my arms.

It's been getting worse and worse over the last few years, says Paraska. This year, she's quitting altogether. If your *pysanky* are good enough, says Paraska, I'll pay you what I've been paying Mrs. Rusnak. The money's not bad if you can work quickly enough.

I don't know, I say. I haven't made *pysanky* in years. And, I mean, even when I *did* make them they were--they were good, but--professional? I don't know about that. Why don't *you* make them?

No time, says Paraska, no talent. It's hard these days to find someone who's good at making *pysanky* and who actually has time to make them.

I tell Paraska that I'll think about it and get back to her. She says that she'll give me complimentary supplies: beeswax, candles, *kistky*, dye, eggs. The works. Whatever I need. She says that it's worth a try. If they're no good, no problem. Just return the supplies and keep on at the coffee shop. I chew my thumbnail, running figures through my mind. Twenty-five dollars for a basic egg, thirty for a more complex egg. Not bad. Two eggs per day, fourteen eggs per week. Not bad at all, We shakes hands to make it official. Then, as I'm about to leave the store, *pysanky*-making supplies in hand, Paraska calls out after me. She tells me that there's no rush with my first batch of eggs; she understands that I'll be busy, flying home for the funeral and all. But I've forgotten about it--for a few, brief moments here, in *Carpathia Arts*, I've forgotten about Kalyna's funeral entirely.

On my way home in the streetcar, I run my finger along the index of *Zaspivaimo Sobi, Let's Sing Out in Ukrainian.* The song titles are listed in alphabetical order in Ukrainian, in the Cyrillic alphabet, and phonetically, in English. *De zhoda v rodyni, Dva vedmedi. I shumyt, Marichka, Teche richka nevelychka.* Most of the songs I recognize. *Oi pid haiem haiem, Oi ty divchyno zaruchenaia.* Midway through the "O" titles, my eye catches a song that I've never sung, a song that I've never heard anyone sing. *Oi u luzi chervona kalyna.* A song with Kalyna's name right in the title.

And then, with *Let's Sing Out in Ukrainian* open in my lap, I start to think. Let's say I learn the song by reading the music. I don't need Mom's help with the words--I can read the Cyrillic alphabet, I can use the English phonetics to make sure that my pronunciations are correct. Let's say I make a recording of the song, on cassette, using the stereo in my apartment. I could start on the *pysanky* as soon as the cassette is in the mail.

My voice will be present, at the funeral, even if I'm not. My voice, after all--my singing--is what they want, not me. And all of them--the whole family--will hear Kalyna's name in the verses, Kalyna's name in the refrain. Kalyna's name sung over and over again, filling the silence of the funeral home. It's a perfect plan. They'll hear her song, and they'll think of her, and no one will even notice that I'm not there.

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Mom says that the night of my UWC interview, she dreamt I was getting married.

You were standing at the altar of the Greek Orthodox Church at Szypenitz, she says, dressed in *my* wedding gown, of all things. The traditional Greek Orthodox wedding crown was on your head, pressing down on *my* veil, and the groom was African. Tall and thin and black, black, *black*. He was wearing a loincloth instead of a tuxedo. A *loincloth*.

The dream is how Mom knew I would be awarded a scholarship two weeks before it actually happened. To dream of a wedding, after all, is to foretell death. And that's what my scholarship is to Mom. Death. Mine or hers, she's not sure. Maybe both.

But I feel as though I've been reborn, as though my life is starting over again. My new birthday is May tenth, the day Tim Van Leuwen calls to tell me that I'm one lucky lady.

According to Tim, this year, for the first time ever, word came down from UWC Headquarters in London, England, reprimanding the Canadian Scholarship Committees for failing to send students to the college in southern Africa. Tim says that HQ strongly suggested that the Canadian Committees send at least one student to Swaziland. And Tim says that since I'm the only candidate in the country who actually wants to go to Africa--the only student who explicitly asked to go to Swaziland--I'm going. If I choose to accept the scholarship, that is.

I am in no way *obliged* to accept. Tim says that if I were concerned about the political situation in South Africa, I could ask to be sent to another college. In which case the committee would by all means accommodate my request. The committee, Tim assures me, has no preference and will exert no pressure either way--regardless of what the bigwigs say in London. The decision, he insists, is mine to make.

The decision, I tell Tim, was made a long time ago.

Wes is--by far--the most excited. Shortly after I give him the news, he disappears into his room. When he reappears a few hours later, he's got a stack of books, magazines, and loose-leaf papers in his hands. By consulting his hunting almanacs and wildlife encyclopedias and rifle magazines, Wes proceeds to plan a complete safari. He makes a rough sketch of basic necessities--transportation (Land Rover), food (malaria pills?), camping gear (include mosquito netting). He compiles a list of big game animals indigenous to southern Africa--zebra, giraffe, lion, wart hog, impala--all organized under the headings *Big Cats*, *Antelope*, and *Other*. Beside each animal, Wes notes the caliber of shotgun he thinks would do the job.

Sophie hugs me, congratulates me. She says, I'm so happy for you!

And Sophie really means it. I can tell--because every time Mom comes up with a reason for me not to go, Sophie stands up for me. Mom says that I'll miss the change of seasons in Canada, I'll miss winter. Sophie says that it's only two years and, besides, seasons change in Swaziland--Swaziland has its own winter. Mom says that I won't be safe in Africa. I'll get mugged, raped, murdered. Sophie says that I could just as easily get mugged, raped, and murdered right here in St. Paul. Mom says that medical care is substandard in a Third World country like Swaziland. What if my appendix bursts? I'll be three days away from a good, Canadian hospital. Sophie says that the college will take care of me--that there are doctors on campus and Johannesburg is a hop, skip and a jump away. According to Sophie, the world's first heart transplant was done in South Africa.

Mom and Sophie fight everyday--usually in the evenings, after Sophie comes home from her summer job at the courthouse. They argue about the quality of the food in Swaziland, the water. Diseases--bilharzia, yellow fever, malaria. Mom clips articles from *The Edmonton Journal*, *Maclean's*, *Time* magazine--anything that has to do with violence and bloodshed in South Africa. Sophie writes a letter to the South African Embassy in Ottawa, requesting general information on the country. She gets a big manila envelope in the mail filled with pamphlets and brochures advertising sandy white beaches and flashy casinos and luxurious spas in Durban and Cape Town and Sun City.

For the most part, I stay out of the arguments between Mom and Sophie. I spend a lot of time in my room, scanning the articles Mom has found and going through the Embassy package. It doesn't seem possible to me that South Africa is as bad as the newspapers say--or as good as the brochures suggest. So I take out a few books from the town library. Books, I think, will paint a more accurate picture. The St. Paul Municipal Library has three titles in its South Africa section: a novel, *Cry the Beloved Country*, by Alan Paton; a collection of Nadine Gordimer short stories; Athol Fugard's play called *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*. I borrow them all.

The books are all about apartheid--pass book laws, homelands, police brutality--even though they're written by white people. Nothing about surfing paradises and holiday spots. The more I read, the more worried I become. Maybe Mom is right. Maybe it is awful, maybe it is dangerous.

By the middle of December, though, there's no turning back. I've got my passport, my transit VISA for South Africa, and my Student Residency Permit for Swaziland. Travel arrangements have been confirmed by the scholarship committee, my tuition has been paid. All of my textbooks are waiting for me at the college. On January 25, I board the plane in Edmonton. Edmonton-Toronto, Toronto-Montreal. Montreal-Paris. Paris-Johannesburg. Johannesburg-Manzini. Because of apartheid, planes destined for South Africa aren't permitted to fly over a number of African countries. My route is the cheapest and most direct one that the committee could arrange; the price tag is almost five thousand dollars. I can't change my mind. Not now.

What I need, Dad buys. He buys mosquito netting for my bed, a special mosquito screen for the window of my dorm room. A twenty-four month supply of malaria pills. He gives me a bright blue, top-of-the-line backpack with an ergonomically-designed frame and a shiny red and white satin Canada flag sewn onto the front pocket.

Dad spends a lot of time reading the Encyclopedia entry for Swaziland. He reads about Swaziland's climate, geography, average temperature, rainfall, humidity. That's how Dad finds out about the rainy season. He buys me a windbreaker, a thick plastic poncho, ankle-high ducky boots and knee-high rubber boots. From an information package sent to us from the college, Dad discovers that the college breaks for six weeks three times a year--and that students generally hitchhike in groups throughout southern Africa during their holidays. So Dad starts pricing out camping gear full-time. Sleeping bags, foamies, Coleman stoves, compasses, safety matches, Swiss army knives. He justifies it all with Christmas. He says that he's just buying Christmas presents.

Two days before Christmas, the bottom of the Christmas tree is covered in presents, most of them for me. The tags on my gifts say *Love, Mom and Dad* but I know that they're really from Dad. Mom hasn't done any Christmas shopping this year.

Mom hasn't been sleeping much, either, or eating. As my departure date approaches, she develops big, black circles under her eyes, her clothes hang on her. Mostly she sits, staring out of windows. Her bedroom window, the living room window. The kitchen window above the kitchen sink.

Dad tries to be extra-cheerful. On Christmas Eve, he drapes more tinsel than usual on his ears--his Christmas tradition--and he sword-fights longer and harder with Wes, using the cardboard tubes from wrapping paper. Dad sings more carols than I've ever heard him sing before--and louder.

Sophie and I pull together as many of the twelve traditional dishes as we can for the Christmas Eve meal. Which turns out to be five. Mom picks at her food for a few minutes, then excuses herself from the table. On Christmas Day--exactly one month before I leave--Mom won't even come out of her room. Dad says that she's not feeling well and that we'd best open our gifts without her.

From Wes there is a special leather pouch that fits snugly inside the front of my pants for my passport and my travelers' cheques. From Sophie there is a big fat book about South Africa by James Michener called *The Covenant.*

Everything else is *Love, Mom and Dad.* Hiking boots, running shoes, leather sandals. Five T-shirts that say "Canada" on the front--to give away to my new friends--plus a Ziploc bag filled with two hundred "Canada" pins. One Canada flag and one Alberta flag, each six feet by four feet; one pair of moccasin slippers made from moose hide, lined with white rabbit fur. *The Official Guide to Back-Packing in Southern Africa.* A road map of Moçambique, Lesotho, South Africa, and Swaziland. A cassette called *Canada: A Land and Its Songs*--with twenty-two classics like "I's The B'y," "Four Strong Winds" and "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald." And five hundred Canadian dollars in American Express travelers' cheques.

Though there are more presents to open than usual, it doesn't feel at all like Christmas. Dad tries to liven up the house; he tells stories and makes jokes and laughs out loud a lot. It still feels as though somebody has died. Mom isn't around to lay out her Christmas morning spread--bacon and eggs, waffles with whipped cream and strawberries, leftover *kutia* from the night before. There is no home-made eggnog, no wassail, no fresh cinnamon buns. For the first Christmas morning ever, we have coffee and toast for breakfast.

I'm not even sure that we'll go to *Baba*-and-*Gido's*. With Mom acting the way she is, it doesn't seem likely.

We go to *Baba*-and-*Gido's*--Mom's parents' place in Vegreville--every Christmas. Christmas Day at *Baba*-and-*Gido's*. It's a tradition. Vegreville is central for everyone--the aunts and uncles in Two Hills, the cousins in Edmonton, us in St. Paul. Nobody misses Christmas Day in Veg--they can't. *Baba* is too old to cook for everyone. The meal depends on all of the aunts' being there. Auntie Mary always roasts a ham, Auntie Linda brings the mashed beans and garlic. Auntie Rose brings *nachynka*. Auntie Marika and Auntie Natalka get together ahead of time to prepare the *nelesneky* and *holubtsi*. Auntie Helen brings mustard pickles, beets and mushrooms, and pickled herring. Auntie Jean makes mushrooms in cream and *pyrizhky* in cream. For dessert, everyone pitches in. Each aunt brings her own assortments of squares.

In a pinch, one or two of the aunts could skip out on Christmas Day and the meal wouldn't be ruined. Especially Auntie Pearl. Auntie Pearl could stay home and no one would notice. Her jellied salads are a flop every year. And Auntie Rose, too--she puts cinnamon in her *nachynka*. Cinnamon, of all things. *Nachynka* should be thick and creamy and a little on the salty side. There's no place for cinnamon in *nachynka*.

Mom, though, could never miss Christmas Day at *Baba*-and-*Gido's*. Never. She brings the turkey. Usually she puts it in the oven right after we open our presents so that it's a glossy golden-brown by early afternoon, when we're ready to go. After she takes it out of the oven, she wraps the roaster in two or three dish towels to keep in the heat, then Dad carries it out to the car.

Today, after Sophie, Wes and I have finished opening our presents--after we've finished eating our toast--we see something that we've never seen before. We stand and stare.

Dad brings a Butterball--a thirty pound Butterball--out of the fridge; he must have left it there overnight, to defrost. He peels away the plastic wrapping, washes the inside and outside of the turkey. All of his movements are slow and deliberate. For a moment, at the spice rack, he pauses--wondering, I'm sure, how he should season the bird. He chooses salt, pepper, and garlic powder. Mom uses garlic salt and seasoning spice. Dad pauses again, this time at the oven dial. Poor, brave Dad. He has no clue what temperature to set the oven at.

Eventually, he settles at 475. Later, when he's left the kitchen to check on Mom, Sophie turns the dial down to 350.

Hours later, as Dad coaxes Mom out of her room, Sophie and I carve pieces of white meat from the turkey carcass. It's not so bad, really. A little drier than usual--and no stuffing--but, with cranberry sauce, it'll be just fine.

Mom agrees to come with us to *Baba*-and-*Gido's*. Against her will, it seems. All the way to Vegreville, she stares out the passenger-side window of the car, as though she's searching for something way off in the distance. The rest of us chatter about the temperature--minus twenty-seven--and the state of the roads and the forecast. We want to go on one last ice-fishing trip before Sophie goes back to school in Edmonton and I leave for Africa. Mom doesn't say a word, doesn't join in. Doesn't answer questions we ask. It's like she's not even with us.

Until we make the turn at the giant *pysanky*, that is.

As we pass the egg on the outskirts of Vegreville, Mom snaps her head toward Dad--eyes blazing, words spilling from her mouth. She talks in Ukrainian and fast--too fast for me to catch a single word, let alone the gist of what she's saying. I glance at Sophie for a translation. Her Ukrainian is much better than mine. Sophie gives me a helpless look, shrugging. Dad doesn't say much--Mom hardly gives him a chance to speak. She talks until we arrive in front of *Baba*-and-*Gido's* house.

I want to ask Dad--What did Mom say in the car, in Ukrainian?--only he's busy plugging in the car and unloading the turkey. I want to ask Mom what she said in the car. I'm sure that it had to do with me--me and Swaziland. But Auntie Mary and Auntie Helen--Mom's eldest sisters--rush out the door of the house, whisking Mom out of the car before I have a chance to open my mouth. The aunts put their arms around Mom, leading Mom into the house as though she is an invalid. Once or twice they glance back at the rest of us, giving us dirty looks. Mom's the youngest in the family, the baby. They're very protective of her.

As Wes and Sophie and I make our way up he front walk, Wes ruffles my hair. Sophie says not to worry, to relax.

It was nothing, says Sophie. Mom was probably complaining about Dad's driving.

I'm not convinced. When Mom and Dad talk Ukrainian, it's *some*thing. They talk Ukrainian to hide things from us. Secretive, confidential things. Serious things.

Baba-and-*Gido's* house is filled with people, activity. Noise. Sonya and Robert's boys have set up their new electric car racetrack in the middle of the living room; Paul and Kelly's boys are playing with plastic Star Wars spaceships and GI Joe figurines. Dean and Diana's daughter is playing Barbies with Orysia and Danny's girl. The aunts and the older girl cousins are banging around in *Baba's* kitchen. They take turns warming their dishes in the oven--some aunts take out the dishes and the cutlery, others set out their pickles and buns and *kovbasa* and squares. Downstairs, the men are visiting. *Baba* and *Gido* have a long table in the basement. The uncles sit around the table playing cards, drinking. All the way upstairs I can smell Uncle Ed's cigarettes mingling with the smell of garlic and dill weed and fresh farm cream.

One by one, Sophie, Wes and I greet *Baba* and *Gido* who sit next to each other in the living room--Baba on a corner of the green vinyl couch, Gido in the matching green vinyl armchair. Sophie is a whiz at talking to *Baba* and *Gido*. She's not the least bit scared of them. First she kisses them each on both cheeks, then she says *Dobryden Baba*, *Dobryden Gido* and makes small talk in Ukrainian. Wes shakes *Gido's* hand, then he sits next to *Baba*--holding her hand, letting her touch his face.

I do my best to imitate Sophie and Wes. I smile, I kiss them--*Baba* and *Gido* both, gently, my lips barely brushing their cheeks. I say hello in Ukrainian.

Then I walk away as quickly as I can. I escape to the kitchen or the basement, where I try to block out the sight of them. *Baba's* face is all veins--grey-brown liver spots and veins--and *Gido* looks like a skull to me. A bony, fleshless skull. I'm afraid to touch them, afraid that my kisses will leave bruises on their faces. Afraid that they'll have a heart attack or a stroke right in front of me, just as I'm kissing them.

Baba and *Gido* are too old to be normal grandparents. Normal *Baba*s and *Gido*s are much younger, and robust, and jolly; they're fun-loving, mischievous. Normal *Babas* bake cookies and cakes and fresh *borshch*. They keep cupboards full of chocolate bars and red licorice; they say, Eat, eat, you're too skinny. Normal *Gidos* tease their grandchildren, tell dirty jokes. They like to sing.

Our *Baba* can't cook anymore, she needs a walker to get around. *Meals on Wheels* brings food to their house every few days. Though he can't read it--could never read it--*Gido* keeps a Bible beside him, tucked in beside the cushion of the armchair. He walks with a cane, can't drive anymore. I've never seen him smile. He is ninety-one, she is eighty-seven. Neither of them speaks more than a word or two of English.

In the kitchen, the aunts are chattering non-stop in English--all at once, it seems, one interrupting the other, voices raised. They talk in English when they want to keep something from *Baba* and *Gido*--the nursing home plan, usually. Sophie and I know all about the nursing home plan, the aunts have been discussing it on and off for the last three years. Auntie Mary, Auntie Helen and Auntie Natalka are in favour; Mom, Auntie Linda and Auntie Rose are against. They argue openly in front of us. Sometimes it even gets ugly--yelling, name-calling. Crying.

Today, though, when Sophie and I walk into *Baba's* kitchen, the aunts' voices drop to a whisper. Then they stop talking altogether. The silence is eerie. The aunts are never silent. If they need to hide something from us, they just switch from English to Ukrainian. They never actually stop talking.

After Sophie, Wes and I fill our plates in the kitchen, we head down the stairs to the basement. Everyone eats in groups around the long table in the basement--uncles, younger cousins, older cousins, aunts. We sit with the cousins who are closest to our age. None of us is actually allowed to eat. Not until *Gido* says Grace. And *Gido* doesn't come downstairs to say Grace until the aunts have served everyone. While the aunts finish dishing out the food, we sit--talking, picking at our food. Waiting.

The cousins don't ask a single question about my trip. Nothing about when I leave or how I feel about going. Kenny talks about his new snowmobile, Dalia tells us about her family's ski trip to Banff. Darrell goes on and on about his Christmas hockey camp in Calgary with the Calgary Flames. I think maybe they're jealous about my scholarship so I don't bring up the subject of Africa. Instead, I ask them what they got for Christmas, how they'll be spending New Year's Eve.

Gido's Grace seems longer than usual. His Grace is always long--always in Ukrainian--and I never know exactly what he's blessing. The food, I suppose. His children, grandchildren. Great-grandchildren. As *Gido* says, Amen, tears come to his eyes. He always cries during Grace. *Baba* hands him a hanky, he presses the cloth to his cheeks.

I've already got a mouthful of *nelesneky* when my cousin Kalyna speaks up. I keep eating--we all keep eating--as though nothing out-of-the-ordinary is occurring. When Kalyna is in a big group of people, she gets over-excited--starts singing, making up little poems. Carrying on about things that don't make sense to the rest of us. We've all learned to live with her outbursts; they're predictable, now--normal, almost.

As Kalyna babbles, Sophie and I critique the Christmas dinner. We give Auntie Linda's mashed beans the thumbs up--just enough garlic, not too many sautéed onions, all-around good texture. Sophie makes a face at Auntie Natalka's *holubtsi*. The cabbage leaves are a greenish-white colour, which means that Auntie Natalka has used fresh cabbage instead of sour leaves. The edges of each cabbage roll are brown and crusty. Clearly, Auntie Natalka over-cooked the lot of them.

I am about to express my yearly disgust with Auntie Rose's cinnamon-laced *nachynka* when I hear Kalyna say my name. She talks in Ukrainian, adding my name in English--*Colleen*--loud enough for everyone to hear.

Before I can turn to Sophie for a translation, *Gido* says something back to Kalyna in Ukrainian. Something stern--a reprimand, I think. Kalyna repeats herself--repeats my name--only louder this time. *Gido* raises his voice at Kalyna, *Baba* asks Mom a question--who turns deathly white, then a bright, flaming red. Mom doesn't answer Baba; instead, she starts to weep, covering her face with her hands.

By now, everyone has stopped eating. I lean hard into Sophie's ear, asking her to translate. Sophie tells me to stay quiet. *Shhh*, she says, I have to hear what they're saying.

Gido yells something in Ukrainian--yells at Mom, I think. Auntie Mary puts her arm around Mom, comforting her. Auntie Rose tries to calm *Gido* but he keeps yelling. In English, Auntie Linda tells my dad to *do* something. Dad says something to *Gido*. Baba cries quietly, saying, *Bozhe, Bozhe--God, God*--as she rubs her eyes with the edge of her apron.

Oh no, Sophie whispers.

What? I say.

Oh *no*. Sophie covers her mouth with her hand.

WHAT? I give Sophie a poke in the arm.

Sophie talks quickly. I'm not sure, she says, but I think--she turns away from me, listening to Dad and *Gido* argue--I think *Baba* and *Gido* didn't know that you're going to Africa. I think Kalyna just told them.

That's crazy, I say. Everybody knows I'm--

Shush! says Sophie. I can't hear what's going on.

Gido gets up from the table, still yelling, pointing his cane at Dad. Dad crosses his arms over his chest. He looks furious. They both look furious. Auntie Jean starts saying something in Ukrainian, Dad tells her to stay the hell out of it--in English. Uncle David--Auntie Jean's husband--gives Dad a hard push, sending Dad across the room. Uncle Harry pushes Uncle David back, calling him a goddamned son of a bitch. Then *Gido* grabs Wes--Wes of all people--by the collar, shaking him and yelling at him.

Poor Wes. He can't fight back--it's *Gido*, after all. While *Gido* shakes him by the shirt, Wes pleads with Sophie and me--pleads with his eyes. He looks terrified and panicked and confused. Sophie and I sit frozen in our chairs. We try to make eye contact with Dad but he's busy holding back Uncle Harry's arms--keeping Uncle Harry from punching Uncle David. Mom is no good to us. She's surrounded by the aunts, all of them crying now. *Gido* drags Wes toward Dad. Wes looks like he's about to cry.

There are no goodbyes. Seconds after Dad sees *Gido* with his hands on Wes, we're out of the house.

We leave our plates of food almost completely untouched. Dad buys us burgers and fries on the way home, at the A&W in Vegreville. He says that Mom will be all right with her sisters--she'll probably spend a few nights with Auntie Rose, then call when she's ready to come home. As we pass through Two Hills, Dad asks if we'd each like a banana split for dessert, from G.O.'s Drive-In, just off the highway. But we've hardly touched our burgers.

It's for the best, says Dad, filling the silence on the car-ride home. Kalyna did us all a favour by telling *Baba* and *Gido*. Your mother just couldn't bring herself to do it. She was afraid of their reaction--and rightly so, I guess.

Dad sighs.

We've got to remember that they're old, he says. They're old and they're old-fashioned and they don't know any better.

It sounds as though he's trying to convince himself.

Their way is to fear everything , says Dad. Anything new, any change. Anything different. That's why those aunts of yours are the way they are. Not a-one of them knows how to swim, how to skate, how to ride a bicycle. *Fear*. Those girls were raised on fear.

Mom can swim, says Wes.

Only because I forced her to learn, says Dad. She was petrified of water--lakes, pools, you name it--scared that she'd drown if she went near it.

Dad slows down as we approach the Duvernay Bridge--asks if anyone needs to stop for a pee at Brosseau--then picks up speed for the final stretch home.

And she was scared to tell you, Colleen--scared to tell *you* that she hadn't told *them*. I offered to talk to *Gido*--a few times, I offered. Every time we visited there, I wanted to tell them. They had to be told, Mom knew that. I think your aunts would have told your *Baba*--I'm surprised they didn't tell her, the way they love to gossip. But your mother wanted to tell *Baba* and *Gido* herself, when she was good and ready.

Why did he pick on Wes? I ask, interrupting Dad. *Gido*, I mean. Why did he yell at Wes like that, and shake him up?

Wes looks out the window, blinking away tears.

Well, says Dad. After I told your *Gido* that the arrangements had all been made--that your trip had been paid for--he suggested that we send Wes to Africa.

Wes? says Sophie. You're kidding.

Dad shakes his head. Don't forget, says Dad, *Gido* hasn't seen much of the world.

He immigrated from Ukraine, I say, interrupting Dad. Doesn't that count for anything?

He was eighteen months old, Dad says. Too young to remember. Never spent a day of his life in school. Really, except for the odd trip to Edmonton, *Gido* never left the farm. So you can't expect him to understand the ways of the world. Women's lib is completely foreign to him. He figures you girls should be getting married about now. And if anyone is going anywhere, it should be Wes. Wes is a boy.

I roll my eyes. Dad continues.

Gido wasn't yelling at you, Wes, says Dad. He was yelling at your mother and me--for sending Colleen instead of you. *Gido* told us that we're as cracked as Kalyna. Crazy. He called us crazy.

Dad slows down to fifty as we enter St. Paul.

But you know, says Dad, sometimes I think Kalyna isn't crazy at all. Sometimes, I think that she's saner than all the rest of us put together.

He turns north down the gravel road that leads to our farm.

Kalyna was the only one who had the guts to speak up, Dad continues. And she did in an eloquent way, too--one hell of an eloquent way. She asked *Gido* to bless you, Colleen. Asked him to say a special prayer for you, for your journey. And when the stubborn old goat wouldn't do it--wouldn't pray for you--well, Kalyna did it herself. Right in *Gido's* face.

Dad chuckles as we pull into the yard. The Christmas lights blink red and green along the eavestroughs of the house. Ralph greets us--barking--at the garage doors.

So, Colleen, says Dad. For what it's worth, you have Kalyna's blessing. Wherever you go, whatever you do, you have her blessing.

The automatic garage door kicks in and Dad eases the car into the garage. As the garage door closes behind us, I watch the snow bank shrink, the full moon disappear. With a flick of the light switch, Dad turns off the Christmas lights outside, and the yard is black.

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The day of Kalyna's funeral, I make my first *pysanka*--my first *Toronto pysanka*, that is. My first commercial egg.

I sit on the floor in the living room, *pysanky*-making supplies arranged on the coffee table in front of me. To my left, I place the dyes--all in pint-sized Mason jars--in order of colour, from lightest to darkest. Yellow, green, orange, red, brick red, black. To my right, I set out the electric *kistka* and the beeswax. Underneath the dyes, the *kistka*, and the beeswax, I lay out old newspaper. But for the egg itself--the *pysanka*-to-be--I make a soft bed of dishtowels, paper towel, Kleenex--all fresh and clean. Dye will never stick to an egg contaminated by newsprint.

According to Mom, the funeral is going to begin early--ten o'clock in the morning, Alberta time, which is twelve noon in Toronto. Father Zubritsky will preside at the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Vegreville. Then, after the service, the funeral-goers have to drive north--a half hour drive north to Szypenitz--for the burial. Mom says that a few years ago, Auntie Mary and Uncle Andy bought plots for themselves in the cemetery at Szypenitz. They pre-paid all of their funeral expenses so that their children wouldn't have to worry about money when the time came. Kalyna is going to be buried beside them--before them, but beside them.

At eleven thirty--eleven thirty on my watch, that is--I turn on the TV. I need something to take my mind off Kalyna's funeral--to keep me from thinking about Father Zubritsky's dark, booming voice, the musty-sweet clouds of incense. The endless chanting from the loft--*hospody pomylo, hospody pomylo*--like voices from the dead.

Without cable, my choices are limited. There is a how-to cooking show being broadcast on a local channel--how to cook duck in orange sauce, how to cook rice pilaf with jalapeno peppers, peanuts, and artichoke hearts. There is *Sesame Street*, brought to us by the letter S and the number 4. The French CBC channel is airing *Footloose*--overdubbed in French, of course; English CBC is covering the World Figure Skating Championships, live from Hamilton. And, on *The Jerry Springer Show*, Jerry Springer is chatting with seven people, all ready to share their most intimate secrets on national television.

Out of curiosity, I settle on Jerry Springer. His first guest is a woman--a man dressed like a woman, actually. To kick off the program, she--or, he--is revealing his true identity to his lover. His heterosexual, male lover. I try to concentrate on my egg, but it's hard to keep my eyes from the scene unfolding on Jerry Springer's set.

For a moment, the transvestite's lover looks stunned. The camera zooms in on his face--his raised eyebrows, his dropped jaw. The transvestite breaks into tears, begging for forgiveness. He says that he's sorry, that he never meant to hurt anyone. That he's on a waiting list for a sex change operation. Jerry strolls through the crowd, giving audience members a chance to talk into the cordless microphone. A big, black woman wags her finger at the transvestite. *Honey, don't you be messing with what the good Lord gave you!* The audience cheers, the transvestite's lover tries to punch the transvestite--bouncers run onstage to stop the fight. Jerry takes a commercial break.

During the commercial, I pick up the *kistka*, touching it to the surface of the egg.

That's when I see myself in the centre of Jerry Springer's set, seated in one of Jerry Springer's plush guest chairs. My parents are offstage. Jerry asks if I'm ready to reveal my secret--I give a tentative nod. The camera turns to Mom and Dad as they emerge from behind a curtain--each holding on to the other, neither smiling. Jerry says, Mom and Dad Lutzak, do you know why you're here today? Can you guess what secret your daughter Colleen wants to share with you here, on national television? Mom shakes her head. Dad shakes his head. I clear my throat. Mom and Dad, I say, remember when I was living in Toronto? And Kalyna passed away, and you asked me to come home for the funeral, and I said that I had a gig?

I turn the channel.

Normally, I would never watch figure skating. I hate figure skaters--*female* figure skaters, in particular. I hate their sequined boobs, I hate their matching sequined feet. I hate their skin-tight, see-through dresses--like lingerie, two sizes too small, cutting high up their thighs, digging hard into their ass cheeks and their crotches. Watching their figures reminds me of how much ass and boobs I've got.

But figure skaters' music is, for the most part, classical--soft, soothing. Good background music for *pysanka*-making. As the *CBC Wide World of Sports* theme music plays, I make my first lines on the egg in front of me. First, I draw two long lines down the length of the egg--two parallel lines, an inch apart. Then, not a hair's breadth from each of the two original lines, I draw two more lines. Double lines are really the secret to a professional-looking *pysanka*. The two double lines form a band lengthwise around the egg and, at the same time, two ovals on either side of the egg.

By the time I've finished the vertical band around the length of the egg, it's past twelve noon. The CBC commentators have introduced the first skater in the long program.

Kalyna's funeral has begun.

My next step with the *pysanka* is a crucial one. In each oval, I need to sketch the outline of a large, geometric flower with eight petals, all equal in size and shape. Within the vertical band, then, I need to make miniature replicas of the same geometric flower.

Filling each oval on either side of the egg is relatively simple. The vertical band is trickier, as the first flower I draw and the last flower I draw have to meet, with no space left over. Plus, beeswax can't be rubbed off, scratched off, or washed off the eggshell. Any miscalculation will be fatal.

The first competitor is a girl from France--a black girl. I have to watch, I've never seen an African figure skater before. Every so often, an Asian skater makes it to the top, but never an African.

From top to bottom, the black girl is made of muscle. I can see muscles rippling down the length of her thighs, her biceps are cut like a man's. She skates to a fast-paced, techno-version of *Flight of the Bumblebee*; her outfit is all black Spandex with neon-yellow stripes.

No mistakes. The black girl is pulling off a flawless performance. I take her as a sign. My *pysanka* is going to be a success. And then--smack--out of the blue, midway through a double axle, the black skater drops to the ice. My *pysanka* is going to be a success so long as I'm careful.

While I practice drawing flowers on the newspaper in front of me, a Canadian newcomer takes to the ice. She half-skates, half-line-dances to an upbeat country song by Garth Brooks. Next, an American appears--in baggy blue jeans and a hooded sweatshirt. Her music is rap. In addition to spins and jumps, she throws breakdancing moves into her routine. Every few minutes, a voice comes over the loudspeaker, announcing the judges' scores--*five five, five five, five six, five five*--and the CBC commentators never stop talking.

Great job landing the triple sow-cow!

Shaky with the triple lutz but a pretty darned good effort, I'd say.

Just about--just about--and--yesss! She makes the double axle.

Between my *pysanka* and the figure skating, there is no reason for me to dwell on Kalyna's funeral. The CBC commentators are the problem. The way they talk makes me think about Father Zubritsky--his voice hissing and bellowing, echoing up through the garlic-shaped dome of the church. I see him swinging the incense burner by its chain, holding up the gold-plated Bible for mourners to kiss. Pacing from side to side at the front of the church, lecturing the young people about going to *cha-ruch.* Kalyna deserves a different funeral, a different farewell. Something gentler.

I'm setting down my egg and my *kistka* for a moment--to change the channel, maybe turn the TV off altogether--when a skinny little Ukrainian girl skates onto the ice. I know that she is Ukrainian because of the tiny yellow and blue flag that appears in the lower left hand corner of the screen. Plus the commentators banter back and forth about the fact that she's from *the* Ukraine.

Even without the flag, though--without the commentator's remarks--I'd guess that the skater is from Ukraine. Eastern Europe, at least. East European skaters are always scrawnier, paler--sicklier, overall--than, say, North American skaters or skaters from Western Europe. The girls from Canada, the United States, Germany, France--they all have chubby cheeks and round bums. They have glitzy, custom-made outfits. Their make-up is glamorous, their hairdos are trendy. The East Europeans always look poor and sad--hungry, even. Like concentration camp survivors. They never smile, never seem to have any fun on the ice. It's as though their lives depend on their performances.

And when the East Europeans win--which they often do--they never really win. The skaters from North America and Western Europe get all of the product endorsements and go on to star in Ice Capades. The Eastern European skaters go back to the Old Country and disappear.

The Ukrainian girl is the last skater in her category. Her skating dress is a plain, royal blue; her music, some orchestral piece with long breaks of solo piano. A piano concerto, I suppose. She skates as if in slow motion, in perfect time with the music--every spin executed with grace, every jump landed with ease.

With quick, solid strokes, I draw one flower inside one oval.

The commentators announce that the Ukrainian girl has nailed a double axle.

I sketch out another flower, inside the other oval.

The Ukrainian girl does a *textbook* triple lutz!

Inside the vertical band, I make my first flower, my second, my third--and--

Ooooh!

The commentators are stunned. She's stumbled. Until now, the Ukrainian skater--like the African skater before her--has been giving the performance of her life. I lift the *kistka* from the egg, my eyes glued to the TV screen.

No! Oh--nooo!

She falls again, this time right down to the ice, flat on her ass, legs sprawled. This is far worse than the African skater's performance, and a bad omen. Very bad. I'm lucky I didn't drop my egg.

While the Ukrainian girl fumbles her way through the remainder of her program, I set down my *kistka*. I watch the expression on her face as she waits beside her coach for the judges' scores. There are beads of sweat along her brow, tears streaming down her cheeks. She is crying. Of course. She was so close, I'm nearly crying myself.

I know that Auntie Mary is crying, and her sisters--Auntie Natalka, Auntie Rose, Auntie Pearl, Mom, Auntie Linda. All of them. They are following the hearse, now, to Szypenitz. I see the procession of cars winding its way slowly down the highway past Two Hills, onto the gravel road that leads to the church. Big, fluffy snowflakes fall onto the shoulders of the pall-bearers, onto the shiny lid of the casket. Uncle Andy holds Auntie Mary's hand as they walk toward the cemetery. There is more incense at the grave, more singing. Someone rings the be[illegible]e belfry--once, twice.

Five two, five two. Five three, five two, five-oh.

The Ukrainian skater covers her face with her hands, her coach puts an arm around her.

As the judges announce the results of the competition, the winning skaters take their place on the podium. Two Canadians take the gold and silver medals, the American breakdancer takes the bronze. According to the commentators, the skater from France--the black girl--came in sixth overall; the Ukrainian girl, eighth. After the medal presentation--after the playing of *O Canada*, twice, and *The Star-Spangled Banner*--the skaters step down from the podium; they gather bouquets of flowers tossed down from the stands.

I switch off the TV, pick up my *pysanka.*

And then they are laying Kalyna in the ground, singing *hospody pomylo, hospody pomylo.* Throwing handfuls of earth over her. The cars are retreating from the cemetery, snaking their way back toward Vegreville for dinner in the basement of the church. There will be individual *kolachi*, rings of braided bread, for each funeral-goer to take home--and oranges, and small, white candles.

With my *kistka* scratching against the white shell, I draw the final white lines--final, I think, and fragile as the lines between winning and losing, living and dying. A zamboni roars through the arena in Hamilton, glazing the surface of the ice. A backhoe grinds and beeps, back and forth between the headstones in Szypenitz, filling Kalyna's grave.

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My plan is to make a quick, clean getaway.

Just drop me off at the airport, I say. You don't even have to walk *in* with me. We'll just wave and say, See you later. As though I'm going away for the weekend.

But Mom and Dad insist on staying with me as long as they can--they take "personal days" to see me off at the airport. Wes gets to miss a whole day of school, Sophie skips her morning classes at the university. They huddle in a group beside the Air Canada counter--Mom and Sophie crying quietly into wet wads of Kleenex, Dad and Wes lifting my hockey bags onto the weigh-scale. I stand two or three feet away from them, my guitar and my knapsack at my feet.

I don't want anyone in the airport to know that this is my first flight, my first solo trip anywhere. My first time away from home. I want to look relaxed--slightly bored--like I know exactly where to go with my airline ticket, what to do with my luggage. I want the world to think that I've done this a thousand times before.

Hockey bags were Dad's idea--two cheap, durable, spacious hockey bags. Of course, experienced travelers don't use hockey bags for luggage. I'm sure of it. Experienced travelers carry tidy little *Pierre Cardin* suitcases and posh *Pierre Cardin* garment bags. They definitely don't fill their baggage to the maximum weight allowance. My hockey bags weigh seventy kilograms each. Dad checked at home on his stainless steel scale. The scale he uses during hunting season, to weigh moose meat.

Colleen! Wes motions for me to step up to the counter.

Window seat or aisle? says the woman in the Air Canada uniform.

Window seat or aisle? Dad repeats.

I pause, wondering what sort of seat an experienced traveler prefers. Before I have a chance to speak, a voice answers for me. A familiar voice--loud, Ukrainian accent--from across the departures lounge.

She'll take the *window* seat. It's her first trip in an airplane, you know. Her *first* trip! Of course she'll want to see the view from up there in the clouds. Won't you, Colleen?

I turn around, glaring. Auntie Rose continues.

I've never been up myself, she says, but I hear it's like a patchwork quilt, all the farmers' fields and the bush and the sloughs. You better take pictures, Colleen.

Trailing behind Auntie Rose is Uncle Bill, her husband, and behind him Auntie Pearl, Uncle Charlie, Auntie Linda, Uncle Ed, Auntie Jean, Uncle David, Auntie Natalka, Uncle Harry, Auntie Mary, Uncle Andy, Auntie Marika and Uncle Dave. Seven aunts and seven uncles--nearly all of my mother's sisters and their husbands. Plus cousin Kalyna, makes fifteen.

The uncles stand quietly in a circle, sipping coffee from Styrofoam cups. The aunts all talk at once. Auntie Natalka asks Mom how she's holding up; Auntie Marika answers that she's a wreck.

Look at her, says Auntie Mary. Just look at her. The poor thing hasn't slept in days.

I'd be a wreck, too, says Auntie Jean, nodding.

If my Sonya were going to the other side of the world, says Auntie Linda, I'd be in the mental hospital.

It's not too late to change your mind, Colleen, says Auntie Pearl.

Never too late, says Auntie Marika.

You can come home with us right now, says Auntie Natalka.

Right now, says Auntie Mary.

Honestly, says Auntie Linda, I'd be in the *mental* hospital.

Auntie Rose grabs my hand and squeezes. You don't listen to those old hens, she says. This is the chance of a lifetime! You get on that plane and you don't look back. You hear me? You don't look back.

A boarding call comes over the airport intercom and for a moment afterward the aunts are silent. Mom and Dad look at each other, then at me. Wes puts his arm around me. Sophie wipes her eyes with the palm of her hand.

Auntie Mary pulls a package of pink Kleenex from her purse. She passes out tissues to the rest of the aunts. Uncle Andy steps forward, whispers in her ear.

Colleen, says Auntie Mary, we're going to say our goodbyes now.

Uncle Andy turns to me. We'll let you have some time alone with your mom and dad, he says, giving me a sympathetic look.

Experienced travelers don't break down in public. I'm sure of it. They definitely don't cry in the airport. But one by one, as each of my aunts kisses me goodbye--as I press my face against each uncle's winter jacket, taking in the smells of cigarettes and Old Spice aftershave--I start to feel my throat tighten. Then, watching them walk away toward the airport coffee shop, the tears come. Hot, wet tears spilling down my cheeks.

Wes tries to make a joke as he ruffles my hair but his voice cracks so he buries his face in my shoulder. Once he's pulled himself together, he steps back toward Mom and Dad and Sophie.

Sophie drops her head down into her hands. We'll write all the time, right? she says, sobbing. And we'll talk on the phone all the time, right? And in no time at all--she stops herself, putting her arms around me.

Then Dad leads Mom toward me, his hand around her waist. It seems as though she'll collapse if he takes his arm away. Her eyes are bloodshot, red and puffy. She reaches out slowly with one hand to smooth my hair. Dad turns away, pretending to cough. When he turns back to kiss me on each cheek, his face is wet with tears.

I force myself to walk toward the boarding gate--right, left, right. I do my best to straighten my shoulders, lift my chin. I try not to feel sorry for myself. But my nose is running. The strap of my knapsack keeps cutting into my shoulder. And each time I look back, Mom and Dad are further away, Sophie and Wes look smaller and smaller. In the distance, they are holding on to each other. I am on my own.

I've never been through airport security before, I don't know what to do. I glance back once more at Mom and Dad, take a deep breath. Then, while I stand in line waiting for my turn, I watch the people around me. Ahead of me are two businessmen in three-piece, pin-striped suits and dark grey trench coats. They empty their pockets into a plastic basket while their briefcases roll down a moving belt through an x-ray machine. In front of the businessmen, a young woman stands with her arms outstretched--a security guard rubs a metal detector up and down her legs, across her torso, sideways along the length of her arms.

None of the other travelers is crying. I wipe the tears from my cheeks.

When my turn comes, I try to act like everyone else--like going through airport security is routine--so that no one will stare at me. I wish that I'd cleaned out my jacket before passing through the boarding gate. I've got used Kleenex, movie ticket stubs, matches, a tampon--oh *God*, a tampon, of all things--and two Tylenol caplets in my pockets. Do they let drugs through security? For a split second, I consider swallowing the pills. But there isn't time. The security guard is asking for my airline ticket and my boarding pass.

After my knapsack has passed through the x-ray machine--after the security guard has looked through my guitar case, rubbed his metal detector against my arms and legs--I'm home-free. Nobody looks twice at my Tylenol. Nobody looks twice at *me*. I follow the other passengers down a long corridor, ready to board the plane to Toronto. After Toronto, it's Montreal. Then Montreal-Paris, Paris-Johannesburg, Johannesburg-Manzini. I'm on my way.

Then, halfway down the length of the corridor, I hear my name--a voice calling my name--not over the intercom but behind me, from the direction of the security check. Several people around me stop walking to look around. I feel my face burning bright red, my palms starting to sweat. Could I have forgotten something? I check for my ticket, my boarding pass. Knapsack, guitar. Nothing is missing. I must have broken a rule. Is it the Tylenol after all? I must be in trouble.

Miss Lutzak? Miss Colleen Lutzak?

One of the security guards taps me on the shoulder. I spin around, ready to burst into tears again. And there, beside the security guard, in her bright red parka--out of breath, but grinning from ear to ear--is my cousin Kalyna.

The security guard says that Kalyna tried to slip through security, that she put up quite a fight when they wouldn't let her through.

I've got an older brother, says the guard, shrugging his shoulders. My brother's sort of--well. He's sort of like your cousin, here. I didn't think it would hurt to bring her to you.

From the pocket of her parka, Kalyna brings out a long necklace of big, pink and purple plastic flowers--a lei, actually. A bonafide Hawaiian lei.

Before you go on your trip around the world, says Kalyna, I must tell you Bon Boyage and Aloha.

With a solemn, ceremonious air, she drapes the lei around my neck.

Bon Boyage! she says. *Aloha*, my dear!

Five or six travelers turn to watch Kalyna as they make their way down the corridor. Some smile. My face turns a bright, flaming red and I don't know if I should laugh or cry. I settle on giving Kalyna a quick hug--a quick thank-you and an even quicker goodbye. And once she has passed back through the security check with the security guard, I stuff the lei into my knapsack.

During the flight from Edmonton to Toronto, I am seated next to an older lady--Gladys is her name. I think that Gladys is the nicest lady I've ever met. She gives me Kleenex so that I can blow my nose and a whole pack of Trident to help my ears as we take off. Then, Gladys starts talking.

Gladys is visiting her daughter, Cheryl-Lynne, who is married to Jerry, a stock broker from Windsor, originally. I see photos of the children from Cheryl-Lynne's first marriage to Adam, photos of the children from Cheryl-Lynne's second marriage to Glen. Jerry is Cheryl-Lynne's third husband; they haven't started a family yet.

Now and again as Gladys talks, I glance out the window of the airplane. I rifle around in my knapsack, bringing out a book, my Walkman--anything to give Gladys a sign that I'm not interested in Cheryl-Lynne. Gladys doesn't take my hints. When the stewardess brings us our lunch, Gladys hardly touches her meal--she's too busy telling me about Cheryl-Lynne's job at Toronto's Sick Kids, Cheryl-Lynne's home in Etobicoke, Cheryl-Lynne's last holiday in Florida. By the time we've landed at Pearson International Airport, I know everything about Cheryl-Lynne.

And I've learned my lesson. From Toronto to Montreal, I don't even smile at the man sitting next to me--a bald, middle-aged man with unruly eyebrows. He orders a drink, reads through his *Globe and Mail*. I sip on a Diet Coke, flip through the airline magazine. I'm a real traveler now. An *experienced* traveler. I know when to expect the liquor cart, the peanuts; when to listen for the captain's voice over the loudspeaker. And I make sure that between the bald man and me, there is no exchange of names, no small talk. No conversation whatsoever.

On the flight from Montreal to Paris, I decide to take a nap. I want to be refreshed when we land in Europe. *Europe*. Except for family trips to the States, I've never been out of Canada before. I've never left the continent of North America. This is my first time overseas.

When I awake from my sleep, I find an older man--an *old* man, actually--staring at me. Staring and smiling. The cabin is dark, save for the odd reading light. I glance at my watch--one o'clock, a.m. I must have missed dinner entirely.

You missed dinner, says the old man, still smiling.

I don't respond. He could be Gladys all over again so I ignore him the way that I ignored my last neighbour. The old man repeats himself, this time louder.

I *said* that you missed dinner.

Uh-huh, I say, reaching down to my knapsack. As I pull out a book from my bag, Kalyna's lei falls out onto the floor of the plane.

Got *lei'd*, did you? says the old man, leaning into me.

Now I can smell the liquor on his breath.

As I reach for the button to call for the stewardess, the man grabs my wrist--hard. He says that he's been watching me sleep for the last few hours.

Yes, he says. I watched you the whole time--watched your little titties rise and fall, rise and fall.

As the man tightens his grip on my arm, my heart races. I feel like I might throw up. I tell him to let go, to take his hands off me. I say *fucking*. Take your *fucking* hands off me.

Oh! he says. She's a feisty one, isn't she!

I can't pull my hand away--he's too strong--so I spit in his face. And as he lifts his hand to wipe away my saliva, I reach again for the button to call the stewardess, my hands shaking. The stewardess appears in the aisle before I've even pressed the button--the stewardess and a middle-aged man in khaki slacks and a khaki shirt. He looks to me like Indiana Jones.

Move her to another seat, says the khaki-man to the stewardess. Move her *now*.

The old man asks what's going on. Why all the commotion? he says, innocently. We were just getting acquainted. He turns to face me. Weren't we?

The stewardess looks at me for an answer but the khaki-man speaks on my behalf.

Bull*shit* you were getting acquainted, he says. I've been listening to you harass the poor girl for the last few minutes.

The stewardess presses her lips together, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. She says, I'll see about moving you. Gee. I'm just not sure if there are any empty seats left.

Pushing the stewardess aside, the khaki-man grabs my knapsack from under the seat in front of me. There's an empty seat next to me, he says, taking my hand. You'll sit there for the duration of the flight.

Before I know it, I'm settled into a window seat one row up--I've got a pillow, a plastic cup half-filled with brandy. Matt, the khaki-man, says that he's never seen anything like it. Never in all his years of traveling. And he's traveled everywhere--Southeast Asia, North Africa, India, South America. I watch him while he talks about his mining business overseas. I study the tiny white scar on his lower lip, the web of wrinkles around his eyes. His face is tanned to a shiny, leathery-brown; the hair on his arms is bleached white-blond. There is grey--sprinkles of grey--in his hair, around his ears and his temples.

Matt is a hunk, no doubt about it--an older, foreign, exotic hunk.

I excuse myself, taking my knapsack with me to the washroom. There, I brush my teeth, dab perfume behind my ears. Experienced travelers probably have romances all the time. I think that I'll flirt a little--nothing too obvious. Africa should really impress him, plus I'll drop a few hints about being far from my family and frightened and lonely. In fact, I'm not the least bit lonely--the old guy scared me a bit but, otherwise, I'm fine. I've hardly thought about home.

When I get back to my seat, Matt is fast asleep--fast asleep and snoring loudly. To get to my seat by the window, I have to wake him. I poke his arm with the tip of my finger. He opens his eyes for a moment--scratches his crotch--then falls back to sleeping and snoring. I squeeze past him, listening to him snore as I settle into my seat. I wish that he wouldn't snore, at least. He sounds like Dad. And, with his head tilted back, I can see hairs in his nose--thick, black, wiry hairs.

By the time Matt awakes--three and a half hours later--I've decided against airplane romance. We chat over coffee in the last hours of the flight, then go our separate ways in the Charles de Gaulle Airport.

There is nothing European, nothing overseas, nothing Parisian about the Paris airport--it's just like the Edmonton International, Pearson, Mirabel. The same duty-free shops, the same magazine kiosks. I expected more--marble floors, maybe, and gold fixtures. Cafés with small, round, candle-lit tables and checkerboard tablecloths and wandering accordion players. I thought the people, at least, would look different--avant garde outfits, haut couture hairstyles.

After I exchange some of my Canadian dollars for French francs, I buy a coffee and a pastry. The coffee tastes like ordinary, everyday Maxwell House. The pastry is chewy and bland.

To kill time, I pick up a handful of postcards. For Mom and Dad, a picture of the Eiffel Tower; for Sophie, the Palace of Versailles. And for Wes, *L'Arc de Triomphe*. Neither *Baba* nor *Gido* can read English--or Ukrainian, for that matter. I pick up a Notre Dame Cathedral postcard for them anyway, to show that I'm alive and well. Maybe they can look at the picture, bring it out when people come to visit.

Once I start to write on the backs of the postcards, I realize that there isn't enough room to say anything meaningful. I want to tell Mom and Dad everything that I've seen, everything that I've learned--about airport security, and customs, and passport control. The flavour and texture of airplane food, the cost of drinks on board. The way that airplane earphones work when you plug them into your arm rest. Sophie and Wes have got to hear about the dirty old creep on the last flight, my brush with romance. Kalyna's farewell gift to me.

The idea comes to me as I'm shopping for paper: I could buy a package of flimsy, see-through air-mail paper to write letters home or--for the same price--I could buy a book. A bound, hard-cover *book* filled with regular, lined sheets--all blank and ready to be written upon by *moi*.

It's genius. Pure *genius*--to write a book about my travels starting at my departure from Edmonton, covering all of my adventures in Swaziland, and ending when I return to Canada, two years from now. After I've filled the book with stories of my trip, I'll present the finished product to my family. Of course, I'll still have to write letters every so often, send the odd postcard. But nothing will compare to the book.

Paris to Johannesburg is, by far, the longest leg of my trip. Fourteen hours from take-off to touch-down, including an hour-and-a-half stopover in Kinshasa to take on fuel and passengers. When the captain comes over the PA system, he explains that our flight will be long because all airplanes destined for apartheid South Africa are banned from a considerable portion of African airspace. It doesn't bother me, of course, now that I have a book to write. Fourteen hours will pass quickly.

My first objective is to come up with an appropriate title. Something clever and quirky. I make a list of possibilities on the airline barf-bag. *Leaving on a Jet Plane* comes to mind. Not a bad title, except that it makes no reference to Africa. *A Passage to Africa* could work. *Into Africa,* even better. Or, *Hello the Beloved Country.*

As I'm covering the barf-bag with possible titles, I get the feeling that someone is watching me. To my right is the window of the plane and to my left there is an empty seat. On the other side of the empty seat, though, sits a guy about my age--a black guy with a pill-box hat tie-dyed yellow and green. He has a fat face, chubby hands. Around his neck--his *thick* neck--he wears a big, leather pendant in the shape of Africa. When I glance over at him, his head is down. He seems engrossed in a paperback novel. I decide that I'm just imagining things. The creepy old man has made me paranoid.

So I return to my list. There is always *The Story of My Life: Colleen Lutzak.* No, that's a title for an old woman's memoirs. *As For Me and My Travels*--cute.

My train of thought is interrupted by the feeling that Mr. Africa two seats over is staring at me. In fact, I'm sure of it now--positive that he's watching me write. I look up quickly, trying to catch him in the act, but he's too fast for me. By the time I lift my head, he's back to his novel.

Nosy jerk. He's dying to know what I'm doing with the barf-bag, what I'm writing on it. He could just *ask*. I'd probably tell him, though it's none of his business. I have half a mind to tell him off--tell him to keep his eyes to himself, let me have a little privacy.

What I need is a secret code--not so much a secret code but my own language. I would have to make a key so I wouldn't forget it. Numbers, maybe--1 to 26 for each letter of the alphabet. On the first page of my book, I start to make the number-letter key. Then I rip out the page. Stupid. It will take me forever to write anything down and I'll lose all my artistic inspiration in the process. Stupid, stupid.

I could switch letters. A=B, B=C, C=D all the way to Z=A. Again, I start on a key to the code. Again, I rip out the page. Just as time-consuming, just as stupid. And Mr. Africa watches me ripping the pages out of my book--this time, he doesn't even hide it. I give him my dirtiest look. He's making me waste time, precious time that I could be spending on my book.

Finally, just as the stewardess appears with lunch, I conceive of a brilliant way--the perfect way--to write my book. I'll be able to read it, my family will be able to read it--but to all other eyes it will look completely cryptic, foreign. Unintelligible. Why didn't I think of it sooner? Using the Ukrainian alphabet, I'll write English words--phonetically, that is. My writing will *look* entirely Ukrainian; read out loud, however, it will sound entirely English. I could *laugh* out loud, it's such a perfect idea.

Mr. Africa is all smiles and small-talk as we eat our meals. He's obviously feeling guilty about invading my privacy. Again and again, he tries to make conversation. I'm not interested. When he asks me questions, I answer, Yes, or No--nothing more.

Going to Johannesburg?

Yup.

And are you from Paris?

Nope.

It's a long flight, isn't it?

Uh-huh.

He has a funny way of talking, a funny accent--sort of British, I'd say, with a touch of something else. Long vowels. It must be African. *South* African, I suppose, since he is going to Johannesburg. And he has a lisp. Going to *Johannethburg*? Are you from *Parith*? Long flight, *ithn't* it?

That's when it dawns on me that maybe I should be friendlier with Mr. Africa. No --*definitely* I should be friendlier. What have I been thinking? Here is my first up-close encounter with a real-life victim of apartheid--an oppressed person with a speech impediment, no less. And I'm not even acting civil. He probably lisps because his family has no money for speech therapy, maybe his lisp is a sort of manifestation of ill-treatment by the white regime. Really, now that I've come up with a way to protect my privacy, he's no threat to me. And I wouldn't want him to mistake my behavior for *racism*.

I'm Colleen, I say.

Mr. Africa's mouth is full. He nods as he finishes chewing his food, then reaches out to shake my hand. Siya, he says, smiling. *Thiya.*

Siya talks a lot, and he talks quickly. He explains that for the last six weeks, he's been traveling in Europe. When he pulls out his passport, I see that nearly all the pages are covered in stamps. Siya was in London, first, visiting friends of his grandparents; then, in Berlin with friends of his parents. He spent Christmas in Geneva, New Year's in Brussels. After Brussels, he traveled around by train through the Netherlands and France.

It occurs to me that if Siya can jet-set around Europe, then his family has more than enough money for speech therapy. The more he talks, in fact, the clearer it becomes that he is--must be--very rich. I hear about German beer, German jazz festivals, the Berlin Wall; about driving at top-speed in his *Beamer* on the *autobahn*; about the gardens around the Palace of Versailles--the *Palath* of *Verthailles*--and the red-light district of Paris, and *Le Louvre*. Buckingham Palace, Hyde Park. Shakespeare's birthplace in Stratford-upon-Avon. Lake Geneva, the United Nations in Geneva. Swiss girls in Geneva. French girls in France. English girls in England, especially, because, prior to his holiday, Siya was finishing his last term at Oxford.

When Siya excuses himself to go to the toilet, I watch him walk down the airplane aisle, trying to imagine what sort of girl would find him attractive. He's fat. Not all fat. From the waist up, he looks fairly trim but from the waist down, his body widens like a pear. And he's short. Shorter than me, possibly. He walks on the balls of his feet, as if to make himself seem taller. At least if Siya talked about himself less, asked me questions about myself, tried to have a real, two-way conversation. Then he might really grow in my eyes.

Have you seen the statue of David? says Siya, settling back into his seat.

I shake my head.

You're joking, he says.

I shake my head again.

You mean you *really* haven't seen the statue of David?

This, I think, does not make for a real, two-way conversation.

You haven't *lived*, says Siya, until you've seen the statue of David. Have you been to the Leaning Tower of Pisa?

I shake my head.

You mean you *really* haven't been to the Leaning Tower of Pisa? I don't believe it! You must have been up the Eiffel Tower, then?

Our entire conversation follows suit. Did I know that the drinking age in Germany is sixteen? That marijuana is legal in the Netherlands? That Jim Morrison's grave is in Paris, France? That London Bridge isn't in London at all but somewhere in the Mojave Desert of Arizona, USA?

I should fight fire with fire--ask him about places and things he's sure to have never seen. Only, I can't think of anything good. I've hardly been outside of Alberta. West Edmonton Mall? The giant *pysanka* in Vegreville? I could try the Rocky Mountains but Siya would just one-up me with the Swiss Alps, the Andes. The goddamn Himalayas.

Really, my best--my only--line of defense is to ignore Siya. So, after an hour of his bragging, I tune him out altogether. I stop nodding, stop answering his questions--stop pretending to be interested. With my book open to the first blank page, I stare to write. And Siya, like Gladys before him on the flight from Edmonton to Toronto, doesn't catch on.

Writing English words with a Ukrainian alphabet is harder than I thought--especially with Siya babbling at my side. It's been so long since I've done any Ukrainian writing, I'm out of practice in forming Cyrillic letters. Plus, for some English sounds--like "th" and "j" and "w"--there are no corresponding Ukrainian letters. I have to substitute--"dat" instead of "that," "dyust" instead of "just," "vell" instead of "well."

The title of the book, I decide, will come later. For now, a chapter heading will have to do. I settle on Чептер Вон, Ситіньг Вит Сія. *Chapter One, Sitting Vit See-ya.*

What are you writing? says Siya.

I take a deep, annoyed breath. Nothing much, I reply.

Is it a diary? he says. It *is* a diary, isn't it? You were writing in it earlier, before lunch. I saw you.

Siya leans over, thrusting his nosy head down, inches from the pages of my book.

What language is that? he says. Russian?

It's *Ukrainian*, I say, pulling the book away from his eyes.

Uker-ain-i-an, Siya repeats. As in, *Ukraine*?

Wait, now, I say. Don't tell me, let me guess. You've been to Ukraine--not once but, what, twice? Kiev, Lviv, Chernivtsi. You've seen it all, done it all. And, let's see, you speak Ukrainian, too. Yes? Am I right?

Not at all! says Siya, ignoring my sarcasm. I've never been to Eastern Europe. But I'd love to go. You are Uker-ain-i-an, then! And all this time I thought you were American. *Tell* me about Uker-aine, tell me all about it. Say something in your language!

I stare at Siya, speechless. How could he miss the anger in my voice, the utter hostility?

Actually, I say, I've never been to Ukraine. My grandparents were Ukrainian immigrants but I'm--

I pause for a moment. How do I explain to Siya that I'm Ukrainian, even though I've never been to Ukraine? I could say Ukrainian-Canadian. Then I'd have to explain how it works, being two things at once.

--I'm Canadian, I say. Not American, Canadian. Born and bred. This is my first trip away from Canada, away from home. I'm going to Swaziland.

Swaziland? says Siya. *Swaziland*? You're really going to *Swaziland*? This is too much! says Siya, grinning. We are going to the same place, you and I! This is *too much*!

Yes, I think--yes, this *is* too much. Siya has the rest of the world to boast about. Swaziland is my only claim to fame, and he's just taken it away from me.

How long are you staying in Swaziland? I ask. I've already resigned myself to the fact that Siya will be with me in the Jan Smuts transit lounge, on board the plane from Johannesburg to Manzini. I'll need a new chapter title. *Sitting Vit See'ya: An Epic.*

Ситіньг Вит Сія: Ен Епик. *Sitting Vit See-ya: A Trilogy.* Ситіньг Вит Сія: Е Трилоджі.

Forever, says Siya, looking down at his hands. No more gallivanting around Europe. Swaziland is my country, and I'm obliged to return to it now that I've finished my studies.

Well, you might live in Swaziland, I say. But you don't *own* it. I mean, technically, it's not *your* country.

This, I think, may well be the pettiest, cattiest thing I've ever said to anyone. Ever ever. And yet, I say it.

Well, technically, says Siya, Swaziland isn't a country at all It's a kingdom. Therefore, technically, I do own Swaziland.

Siya's face is stern now.

I am Prince Siyabonga Dzabulema Liteboho Dlamini. Prince of Swaziland.

Right, I say under my breath, returning to my book. *And I'm Abracadabra Yabba Dabba Doo, Queen of the Prairies.*

The last king, Siya continues, the great King Sobhuza II, was my grandfather. My maternal grandmother was co-wife of Inkhosikati Ntombi Tfwala, mother of His Majesty King Mswati III, the reigning monarch. Which makes His Majesty my half-uncle and me, Prince.

I know that Swaziland is a kingdom, I read about it in the *Encyclopedia Britannica.* And King Sobhuza's name *is* all over the college pamphlets--he's the person who came up with the "Kamhlaba" part of Waterford-Kamhlaba United World College of Southern Africa.

Yeah, well, I stammer. If you're a prince, shouldn't you be flying in a private jet? Or, I mean, you know, first-class at least?

I choose to travel like regular people, says Siya with a shrug.

And shouldn't you have--I don't know--*bodyguards* or something?

Siya chuckles. Look, he says, Sobhuza had over one hundred wives. There are scores of us Swazi Princes and Princesses. It would cripple the economy if we each traveled with an armed entourage. Besides, who would ever want to harm a Swazi royal?

I don't answer.

In the Jan Smuts Airport, Siya helps me drag my hockey bags off the luggage carousel. His luggage is small, dark-green, and designer. Together we stand in line at Customs. Just as I suspected--just as I dreaded--we are taking the same flight from Johannesburg, South Africa to Manzini, Swaziland. Waiting for our bags to be searched, Siya gives me last minute Swazi-trivia.

Did I know that Swaziland has the second largest man-made forest in the world? I should go see it--the Usutu Paper Mill, too, if I have the chance. For camping out, there is Malolotja Game Reserve and Mkaye, which is better but more expensive. Did I know that Swaziland has ritzy casinos in the Ezulwini Valley? Live entertainment nightly; world-class dining. For souvenirs, the Swazi Candle Factory, Ngwenya Glass--African Fantasy by Armstrong Artworks, in the Mbabane Mall, and Endlotane Studios on Oshoek Road.

I couldn't possibly remember everything Siya tells me--not without writing it all down, and I've long since given up on my book. Once I'm settled in at the college--while my memory of the trip is still fresh--I'll bring it out again.

My turn comes up at the Customs counter and I am ready with my hockey bags open, passport and plane ticket to Swaziland in hand. Two fresh-faced teenagers in army fatigues greet me. One has platinum blond hair cropped so short that patches of his blotchy-pink scalp show through; the other has darker, longer hair. Both are tall and broad-shouldered, both carry rifles. And beside them, tethered to a chain--alert and menacing--sits a large German shepherd.

The dark-haired soldier takes a quick glance at my passport.

Canadian, he says. Don't believe what you've heard about us. We're not monsters.

The dark-haired soldier gives me a wink as he waves me through. He doesn't so much as touch my bags. Then Siya steps up to the Customs counter, and both soldiers turn their attention to him. They ask Siya to open all of his bags; with the tips of their rifles, their poke through Siya's clothes and toiletries. One of the soldiers--the blond--lifts out a framed certificate. The writing on the paper is Latin, I think, and there is a gold seal on the bottom, right hand corner. It's Siya's degree, from Oxford.

With the framed degree in his hand, the blond soldier says something to the dark-haired soldier--in Afrikaans, I think. I don't understand what they're saying. My guess is that they're looking to make trouble for Siya. For a moment, I glance around the airport, trying to spot someone official, someone who can help us. But there is no one to turn to. The soldiers *are* the officials.

It's mine, I say to the soldiers, blurting out my words. There wasn't room in my own bags, so Siya here agreed to take it for me. It's just my degree, I add. From a university in Canada. Right, Siya?

I look at Siya, the soldiers look at Siya. Siya nods.

The University of Alberta, I say, in Edmonton. Alberta.

The two soldiers exchange words, again in Afrikaans.

You know, I say. The city with the famous mall?

The soldiers seem to ignore me. For several minutes, they continue to poke through Siya's bags. Then the blond finally tosses Siya's degree in the direction of Siya's suitcase, missing the suitcase altogether. I pick up the frame, its glass cracked, now, down the centre. Siya snaps his suitcase shut. As we are about to walk away from the Customs counter, the blond soldier steps in front of me, blocking my way. He stands so close to me, and he is so tall, that I have to lift my chin to meet his gaze.

Kaffir-lover, he says, spitting the words in my face.

According to Siya, the flight to Swaziland is quick--Up and down, he says. Forty-five minutes and we're there. His hands are shaking, I notice, as we buckle our seat belts in the *Royal Swazi* plane. Beads of sweat have formed on his forehead. My own pulse is still racing. *Kaffir-lover*. I've never heard such awful words.

Those soldiers, I say. They wouldn't have--you know--they wouldn't have really *done* anything to you, right? I mean, you're royalty. And you've flown through Jan

Smuts lots of times. They wouldn't have--they're not really allowed to--to *do* anything. Right?

Siya pulls a handkerchief from his pocket, wipes the sweat from his forehead.

Tell me, he says. How do you say "thank you" in your language? In your Uker-ain-ian language? Please. I'm curious. Thank you in Uker-ain-ian. How do you say it?

Come on, I say. I told you, Ukrainian isn't my language. I want to know about the soldiers. They wouldn't have taken your degree, right? What would that prove, you'd just get another copy sent from--

In my language, says Siya, in SiSwati, we say *Siyabonga*. To you, I would say, *Siyabonga, Sisi*. Which means, *Thank you, Sister.*

Wait a second, I say. That's your name. Isn't it? *Siyabonga.*

Siya nods, one tear trickling down the side of his chubby face.

Well, I say.

Siya slowly wipes the tear with his hanky.

I guess, in Ukrainian, your name would be--here, repeat after me. *Dee-yak--*

Dee-yak--

Dee-yak--oo--

Dee-yak-oo --

Dee-yak-oo-yoo, Diakuiu.

Diakuiu. Diakuiu.

***

So she didn't like my song, *Oi u luzi chervona kalyna.*

Oh, she appreciated the effort taken on my part to find it, to learn it, to practice, to set it down on tape. She thought the quality of the cassette was outstanding, too, given that I recorded it at home. And, of course, it goes without saying that she enjoyed hearing my voice. She said that it was lovely, hearing me sing again. But she--Mom--didn't like the song itself. She knew that it would never do for Kalyna's funeral. She didn't bother playing it, even, for Auntie Mary and Uncle Andy.

I'm angry. More than angry. *Furious.* While Sophie talks, I hold the receiver of the telephone against my left ear with my left hand; with my right, using a teaspoon, I stir the black dye in the Mason jar. If my *pysanka* weren't inside, its shell leaning gently against the glass, I would throw the jar across the kitchen--dye and all. I would make the glass shatter against the wall; watch the black liquid leak down the wall, leaving murky puddles on the linoleum.

I start to explain to Sophie, then, that I'm not stupid, that I understand Mom's decision to ban my song from the funeral--I understand it perfectly. Mom is punishing me, clearly. For staying in Toronto, for not coming to the funeral. She took away my only chance to say goodbye to Kalyna--took it away intentionally, cruelly. Mom's decision had nothing to do with the song. Nothing at all. Did Mom even listen to the tape? Because if she'd listened--if she'd really *listened*--she would have known that the song was ideal, the song was *made* for--

Sophie breaks in. Hear me out, she says. Before your get your shit in a knot, just hear me out. See? she says. This is exactly what Mom was afraid of. You're so defensive. So *frigging* afraid of a little criticism.

I tap the teaspoon against the side of the jar. Mom and Sophie are in on this together, I see. They're a team. A united front against me on a mission to make me feel guilty. If they think that it's going to work, though, they're sorely mistaken. I don't feel guilty that I missed Kalyna's funeral. I couldn't afford the time--not now that I have a job and responsibilities; *pysanky* to make. I don't feel the least bit guilty. Why should I feel guilty? I have no guilty feelings whatsoever.

Was there *any* music? I ask. Because, you know, Kalyna loved music. I hope there was music. For her sake. I mean, my song aside--which was perfect for the occasion--there really should have been some music. At the prayer service at least.

I can hear the annoyance building in Sophie's voice. She says that, *yes*, there was music, at the prayer service *and* at the funeral. Mom spent hours meticulously searching through a dozen cassettes--cassettes of *my* singing--that were lying around at home; she didn't stop until she found an appropriate song. In the end, the song that *she* chose was played *three* times, in fact--at the funeral home, at the church, and at the lunch afterwards in the church basement. And, says Sophie, for the record, the song *you* chose was entirely *in*appropriate.

Wrong, I say. You're wrong. I chose it specifically for Kalyna.

Come *on*, Colleen, says Sophie. Do you have any idea what the lyrics mean? Did you bother to look up the words? Find a translation? You know, you could've called Mom and asked her. It would've saved everyone a lot of trouble.

But as I lift my *pysanka* out of the black dye, I tell Sophie that I didn't have to call Mom, that I didn't need a translation. I tell Sophie about Kalyna's name appearing in the title of the song and in the verses; I tell her about the minor chord structure. Clearly, I explain, *Oi u luzi chervona kalyna*, is a sad ballad about a young girl, a maiden named *Kalyna*. I mean, it doesn't take a full translation to get the gist of the song.

Sophie laughs--a sarcastic kind of snorting laugh. She says that *Oi u luzi chervona kalyna* is a Ukrainian nationalist anthem, a rallying song for Ukrainian soldiers. It's all about freeing Ukraine from the Russian overlord. And *kalyna*, in the song, isn't a young girl at all, it's a berry. *Chervona kalyna*, the red cranberry, a metaphor for Ukraine. The soldiers are supposed to free it and lift it and glorify it.

Oh, I say, quietly. Oh.

I pause. What song did Mom choose, then? I ask, slowly dabbing the *pysanka* with a Kleenex. Then, as Sophie answers, I nearly drop the egg. She says, *The Rose*. I ask her to repeat herself, in case she's made a mistake. Again she says, *The Rose*.

I hate *The Rose*. Sophie knows how much I hate *The Rose*, Mom knows how much I hate *The Rose*. The lyrics are sappy, clichéd. *Some say love, it is a river that drowns the tender reed. Some say love, it is a razor that leaves your soul to bleed.* My aunts have asked me to sing it a half-dozen times at anniversaries, weddings, birthday parties. Not that the aunts need an occasion to request it. They make me sing *The Rose* at every family gathering, formal or informal.

I don't want to hear how much the aunts enjoyed the song at the funeral, how hard they cried into their wads of pink Kleenex. How many times they told Mom and Dad and Sophie and Wes that it was heart-warming and moving and touching and sad. Sophie says that it was as though the song were written for Kalyna's funeral--especially the last verse.

But I don't want to hear any of it. Kalyna deserved more than *The Rose*, more the usual old family standard. I could have written a special song for Kalyna. I should have. She deserved a song of her own.

Was it--was it nice ? I say. I mean, the funeral, and the burial. Overall. Was it--you know--was it *nice*?

It was sad, says Sophie. Dad had a hard time with the eulogy. He talked a lot about Kalyna's life, you know, *before*. He talked sort of vaguely about the hard times that she'd been through and about the way that she died; he read the "for everything there is a season" psalm and he gave a semi-religious speech about how Kalyna is in God's hands now. Was it nice, though, overall? I don't know. I suppose so. There were roses everywhere, that was nice--on either side of the casket, on top of the casket, all over the front of the church. She was wearing something white, kind of like a lacy nightgown--really, it looked as though she was sleeping. Of course, I couldn't understand a word that Father Zubritsky said, so who knows what he went on about. But Dad made it seem as though Kalyna is in a better place, as though *she's* better now.

I'm sorry that you missed it, says Sophie.

For a long time after we've said goodbye, I sit staring at the phone, at my *pysanka* wrapped in its shroud of Kleenex. All that's left now is to remove the beeswax from the eggshell. As I lift up the egg, I can see the beeswax lines I've drawn, raised like miniature mountain ranges on a miniature globe. The words to *The Rose*--to the last verse of *The Rose*--run through my head as I light the candle, preparing to bring the *pysanka* to life.

When the night has been too lonely
And the road has been too long

And you think that love is only
For the lucky and the strong.

I have to work quickly and carefully, paying close attention to the web of black lines melting and merging into glossy patches of wet wax. Hold the egg too close to the flame--hold it too close for a second too long--and the egg is ruined: long, black smoke-stains are emblazoned on the surface of the egg, permanently, and hairline cracks spread across the shell.

Just remember in the winter
Far beneath the bitter snow
Lies the seed that with the sun's love
In the spring becomes--

There is no time to wipe the tears from my eyes. I watch them fall on the surface of the *pysanka*; watch them mingle with the melted wax, the petals of the *pysanka's* flower; wipe them away, gently, with the Kleenex in the palm of my hand.

***

By the time we touch down in Swaziland, Siya knows a half-dozen words and phrases in Ukrainian--fragments of language that I remember from my Ukrainian classes in elementary school. Hello, *Dobryden*. How are you? *Iak sia maiesh*? Merry Christmas, Happy Easter. *Khrystos rodyvsia, Khrystos voskres*. Cookies, *korzhyky*. *Ia pechu korzhyky*. I bake cookies.

In return, Siya teaches me Swazi protocol.

Remember, he says, as we make our way across the tarmac. Swazis will be greeting you left and right. Nearly everyone speaks English, at least in Mbabane and

Manzini. But, nonetheless, wherever you go, they'll greet you in SiSwati. You must greet them back *in SiSwati*. It's the custom. They say, *Sawebona*. You say, *Yebo*.

Siya drags out the vowels of the SiSwati words. *Sawebooooona*. *Yeeeeebo*.

While Siya talks, I stare straight ahead--across the runway, over the airplane hangers. Up along the horizon to the hills stretched out before us. Dark, wet-green hills speckled with blue-grey rock and clusters of tall, leafy trees. I didn't expect this. The pictures in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* didn't look like this.

Don't buy anything at the airport, says Siya. No wooden masks, no soapstone carvings.

I expected savanna. Dry, flat grassland--like in the movies. Almost desert. *Dusty*. The odd spindly shrub; a few baobabs with bone-thin, twisted trunks.

Here, Siya continues, at the airport, the vendors will charge you double--triple--the market price. The taxi-drivers, too. They will all know that you're a foreigner--that it's your first trip to Swaziland--and *trust* me. They'll adjust their fare accordingly. *Remember*. No more than thirty-five, forty emalengeni for a lift to your school. Not a penny more. Got it?

Yes, I *got* it--all of it and then some. Where to open a bank account, who to see about cashing travelers' cheques. The address of the South African Trade Commission in Mbabane, so that I can apply for my next transit visa. Directions to the Ekhwezi Bar and Grill, for good food and live music. Before we part, Siya shakes my hand--in keeping with Swazi custom--clasping his left hand around his right wrist. He says, *Hamba Kahle*--Go Well. And then, with a grin, he says, *Do pobachennia*. Goodbye, in Ukrainian.

I watch Siya stroll past Customs and Immigration. Through the window of the building, I see him disappear into the back seat of a shiny, black Mercedes. I wave. It's impossible to tell if he waves back. The windows of the car are tinted black.

They will all know that you're a foreigner.

Of course they'll know. It's thirty degrees Celsius outside--at least thirty-five degrees inside. No one else in the airport is wearing corduroy slacks or a heavy wool sweater. No one else is carrying a winter coat, lugging *hockey* bags across the floor of the airport.

No one else is white.

There are other *Caucasian* people milling around me, sure. Dozens of them. The flight from Johannesburg was packed full of South Africans all destined--according to Siya--for the casinos of the Ezulwini Valley. But the Caucasian South Africans aren't white. Each is tanned to a particular shade of brown. Deep bronze-brown, dark olive-brown. Golden yellow-brown. My skin hasn't seen the sun for months; it looks more blue than anything.

As the taxidriver eases out of the parking lot, I pull out my camera. His car is a dark green, four-door Mazda sedan--the biggest, newest, least-rusted taxi I could find. I take two photos inside the car--one of the fuzzy red covers on the front seats, one of the back of the taxidriver's head. Reggae music blares from four speakers on the back ledge behind me. Every so often, the taxi-driver opens his window. He has no air conditioning. Also no seat belts, no rear view mirrors, and--from what I can tell--no speedometer. I take photos of his dashboard.

I shift, then, from side to side in the back seat, camera poised so that I don't miss a shot. This, after all, is my first real glimpse of the Swazi countryside. I want photos of everything--the women walking barefoot with baskets on their heads, babies tied to their backs with blankets; the groups of school girls in uniform, chatting on the shoulder of the road. Soon, I think, we'll come upon them. There will be men, too, in traditional Swazi dress, and little boys herding goats along the ditches.

By the time we reach Mbabane, though, forty-five minutes later, I've only seen cows. Cows grazing in the fields beside the road, cows walking on the side of the road. They're skinny cows, too--so skinny that I can count protruding ribs--and they have abnormally long, twisted horns growing out of their heads. Three times, the taxidriver comes to a full stop to avoid hitting a cow. Three times, I think that maybe he should plough into the poor animals, put them out of their misery. Around Mbabane, the cows finally peter out, and then the shopping malls start, complete with supermarkets and gas stations and hamburger joints.

As we make our ascent up the Waterford hill--up the narrow, winding road that leads to the college--I spot a mud shack with a thatched roof, an open cooking fire, two children chasing each other around their mother's legs. My camera is lifted and I'm about to take the perfect picture--some Swazi shrubbery framing the scene, the African sun setting in the background--when the taxidriver starts talking to me. It takes me a moment to adjust to his accent, make out what he's saying--something about marriage and cows, about my father. When I ask him to repeat himself, he asks me straight out if I have a husband. I say no, of course. I laugh. He asks if I will marry him. Fifty cows, he says. He will give my father fifty cows. He isn't laughing.

WELCOME

Waterford Kamhlaba United World College of Southern Africa
WE ARE ALL OF THE EARTH, WHICH DOES NOT SEE DIFFERENCES OF COLOUR, RELIGION, OR RACE. WE ARE 'KAMHLABA'--ALL OF ONE WORLD.
- King Sobhuza II

As we reach the college gates, I can hardly wait for taxi to stop before I jump out of the back seat. The taxidriver asks for sixty emalengeni, and my hand in marriage--again. This time, he says, Sixty cows. I remember Siya's advice. I know that sixty is too much. But I hand over the money without a second thought--my left hand gripping my right wrist, according to Swazi custom. No questions asked.

King Sobhuza's words are everywhere--across the top of Waterford's *General Information Brochure*, in the introduction to the *International Baccalaureate Students' Handbook*, on the first page of the college's *Official Rules and Regulations*. In his opening address to the student body during the first general assembly of the term, the headmaster, Mr. Harrington, quotes King Sobhuza. Mrs. McLachlan, head of the IB hostel and head of the music department, includes the same quotation in her closing remarks to the assembly.

Before the end of my first day in Swaziland--without even trying--I've got the words memorized . *We are all of the earth which does not see differences of colour, religion, or race. We are 'Kamhlaba'--all of one world.*

Memorizing the college rules isn't so easy. At the first assembly, I write them down in my diary, in the book that I bought in Paris. Attendance at breakfast is mandatory--seven a.m. to seven-fifty. There is a compulsory morning assembly from eight a.m. to eight-twenty, classes from eight-thirty to twelve noon. Lunch until one, classes until three. Afternoon sport from three to five. Between five and six, more classes. Between six and seven, dinner. Study period from seven and nine. Check-in and lights-out by ten-thirty.

Community Service every Tuesday morning. Four hours of mandatory volunteer work in Mbabane, eight kilometers from the college. Classes every other Saturday morning. Four hours of regular classes.

No walking, hiking, or jogging in the hills behind the school without permission from the on-duty staff member. No swimming in the college pool without permission from the on-duty staff member. No day trips to town--to Mbabane--without permission from the on-duty staff member. No weekend exeats without permission from the on-duty staff member. No loud music permitted in students' cubies. No food permitted in students' cubies. No members of the opposite sex permitted in students' cubies. No smoking, drinking, or drugs, on or off campus.

Following the first general assembly, Mrs. McLachlan announces free time for the senior students, the IB's--time to unpack our bags, settle into our cubies.

Cubie is short for *cubicle*. Each girl has her own cubicle--her own private space, five-feet by six-and-a-half. There is a cement bed built right into the wall; across from the bed, a desk; beside the desk, a cupboard, also built into the wall. The cubie door doubles as the cupboard door, so that when the cupboard is open, the cubie is closed--and vice versa.

Settling into my cubie isn't my first priority--showering *is*. I've been wearing the same clothes since I left home. Shower first, unpack later. I can almost feel the water pelting my shoulders and back, rinsing away the last three days of traveling. Are there rules against showering at this time of day? I wonder. Flipping through the book of *Official Rules and Regulations*, I hear water running, voices echoing against tile. It must be all right.

But it isn't all right. It isn't all right at *all*. Two steps into the bathroom--soap, shampoo, conditioner, and razor wrapped inside my towel, bathrobe tossed over my shoulder--I realize that I'm in trouble. There are no walls between the shower-heads, no curtains. Nothing to divide the shower-area from the toilets and the sinks. Just one, big steamy room filled with wet, naked bodies. Three girls stand side-by-side under three jets of water, chatting as they lather their armpits and crotches. At the sink, two girls brush their teeth--bare-breasted, towels wrapped around their waists

My heart races as I slip back into my cubie, shut the door tightly behind me. I'm a private person. Showering is a private activity. What if I have my period? Oh *God*. Girls staring at my nude, menstruating body. I won't do it. I won't shower in a group. If I have to, I'll get up in the middle of the night--shower at four in the morning, if that's what it takes. For now, a change of clothes will have to do.

Of course, nothing is left unwrinkled in my hockey bags--they've been packed for well over a week. I pull out a pair of brown walking shorts, a white cotton T-shirt. Each corridor has a communal iron and a communal ironing board. Shorts and T-shirt in hand, I head up the corridor to press my clothes.

Another girl has beat me to it--a girl in a beige bra and a long, black skirt. A black girl ironing a blouse with black-and-white polka-dots. My first new friend. I decide that while she irons, I'll introduce myself--find out her name, where she's from. Except that by the time I reach the ironing board, the girl is walking away--quickly, though I can see that she hasn't finished. Half of her blouse is still criss-crossed with sharp creases.

Hang on! I say. Come back!

The girl stops dead in her tracks. Then, slowly, she turns back toward the ironing board.

You can keep on, I say, smiling as I point to the iron.

The girl doesn't smile back. Without a word, she lays her blouse across the ironing board.

Are you from here? I ask, trying to be cheerful. From Swaziland, I mean?

The girl shakes her head as she passes the iron across her blouse.

From South Africa? I ask.

She nods, her eyes focused on the blouse in front of her. She's shy, I think. I'll have to do the talking.

I'm from Canada, I say. I've been traveling for the last three days. My clothes are wrinkled something terrible! Just *look* at these shorts. I don't know how I'll ever get them straightened out.

The girl looks up from the ironing board. Shall I press them for you? she says, quietly, whispering almost.

Why would *she* press *my* shorts?

If you want, she says, I could show you how to press them yourself. It's not very hard once you get the hang of it.

I've *got* the hang of it thank-you-very-much, I say, laughing. Who do you think has been ironing my clothes all my life?

The girl shrugs. I stop laughing.

Me! I say. *I* have. *I've* been ironing my clothes all my life!

I could show you, she repeats. It's all right. There's a first time for everyone.

For a moment, I stand staring at her. Speechless. I try to think of a way to explain it to her--not all white people grow up with servants. We don't all have nannies and maids and housekeepers. But the way she's looking at me, her eyes wide, head cocked to the side. The way she spoke--*There's a first time for everyone*. She wouldn't believe me, I'm sure of it. Slowly, I walk back to my cubie.

I start to plan my cubie, then--where I'll hang my pictures, set out the odds and ends that I brought from home. Above my bed, posters of my favourite singer--Joni Mitchell. Joni Mitchell in blue jeans and a tie-dyed shirt, sitting in a pile of straw next to her yellow acoustic guitar. Joni Mitchell close up--pensive--her hair long, hanging limp and straight. Joni Mitchell live, in concert. Eyes closed, mouth open.

On the back of my cubie door, with thumbtacks, I'll pin up my print of Picasso's *Three Musicians*. Beneath the Picasso, I'll tape up my Canada flag--the small paper flag that I saved from last year's Canada Day celebration in St. Paul. And around the burglar bars in my window, I'll wind a red and green flowered scarf--the kerchief that I wore during my last year of Ukrainian dancing.

Unrolling my close-up Joni Mitchell, I hear voices nearby. Voices chattering and giggling. When I open my door, I see three girls seated side-by-side on the bed in the cubie across the hall. Three Indian girls in bright-coloured saris drinking tea, flipping through photo albums. From the tip of an incense stick, ribbons of smoke drift out of the half-open cubie door.

For a moment, I hesitate. I can't just barge in, pushing myself on them--*forcing* them to be my friends. I could ask to borrow masking tape for my posters. A tea-bag, maybe. Some sugar? Then I remember my Canada pins. Tiny plastic Canadian flags--two hundred of them--in a Zip-loc bag, compliments of our MP at home. Gifts for the girls, ice-breakers. Conversation-starters.

Pins in hand, I knock on the half-open door. I call out, *Helloo-oo. Sawebooooona!*

The giggling stops. There is a shuffling inside, the sound of the photo albums being shut. One of the girls pokes out her head.

Yes? she says.

I'm your new neighbour! I say, smiling as I reach out to shake her hand. Colleen Lutzak, from Canada!

The Indian girl smiles back, gives my hand a polite squeeze. Her name is Preeya. Inside her cubie, I meet Vijia and Samina. After the three girls thank me for the Canada-flag pins, the four of us sit together--in silence, for the most part. I ask questions--Where are you from? How many years have you been at Waterford? How many years have you known each other?--and they give one-word answers.

Botswana. Seven. Seven.

A few minutes later, I excuse myself, explaining to Preeya, Vijia and Samina that I've got bags to unpack, posters to put up. Back in my cubie, I hear one of the girls mimicking my voice with a thick drawl--*I'm your new neighbour from Canada.* Another girl says, *Shhhh.* The giggling resumes.

I try not to let the Indian girls bother me--I try to concentrate on decorating my room--but tears come to my eyes as I stare at my empty cubie, my blank walls. Up the corridor, a group of girls gathers, talking and laughing. Down the corridor, someone turns on a stereo. Outside my cubie door, two girls reunite for all the hostel to hear.

I've missed you so much! says one girl. I've missed you, too! says the other. The two girls gossip about their travels over the Christmas holidays, they share news from home.

With tears streaming down my face, now, I plunge my hands into my hockey bags. I pull out all of my jeans, T-shirts, shorts. My one-piece bathing suit, my two-piece bathing suit. Socks, panties, bras. Flannel pajamas. In one of my bags, there is an envelope of photos taken at home over the last year. I'll put the pictures up around my bed, above my desk. In the spaces between Jonis, between Picasso and the flag of Canada.

There are photos of Mom and Sophie in the summer--Mom lifting her first batch of *pyrih* from the outdoor clay oven that Dad had just built; Sophie at Mom's side, holding back our dog Ralph as he jumps at the loaves of bread. Sophie, Wes and I posing before a Hallowe'en Party in matching green costumes--we went as three peas in a pod. Dad and

Wes ice fishing at Carrie Creek in red-and-black Merc snowmobile suits, the two of them holding up thermos mugs of rum and coke, saying *Cheers* to the camera.

Where are the photos?

Sobbing now, I turn the hockey bags upside-down, shaking their contents onto my bed. A box of Tampax drops out, scattering tampons across the floor. Plastic cassette-cases crack against the cement; my hardcover copy of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* drops onto Joni Mitchell's torso, ripping a hole in her guitar. I don't care.

And when I finally find the envelope, I only cry harder. Tears dripping onto the photos--onto Ralph's nose, onto Mom's bread. Onto Sophie's green hands.

For three days, I cry--off and on--usually at night, sometimes in the morning, first thing. Before classes begin each day, I find my way to the assembly hall--alone--eyes red and swollen.

The assembly hall is a long, rectangular auditorium filled with rows of benches that slope down to a stage at the front. Dark red velvet curtains frame the stage; there is a podium in the centre, a piano in the wings. Everyone has an assigned area in the assembly hall--senior students at the back, junior students at the front, faculty on stage behind the podium. Mr. Harrington starts every assembly with the Swaziland National Anthem, followed by a reminder that Waterford was founded in 1963 as a response to the separate and unequal educational systems in apartheid South Africa.

I sit with my books in my lap up near the top of the hall, looking down at the other students. They all sit in clusters--white students separate from black students separate from Indian students. Boys sit with boys, girls with girls. Boarding students sit apart from day students. The IB students who have gone to Waterford all their lives sit far from the newcomers, the scholarship students.

Six new students, in fact, have come to Waterford on United World College scholarships--six including me. All girls. We have History together so I know their names and their nationalities. They know me, too.

Maria is a doll. Literally. Four foot six, maybe four foot seven, with miniature doll hands and miniature doll feet. We spend ten full minutes in our first history class trying to figure out where she's from. Ee-TIL-ee, she says. Ee-TIL-ee. Italy? Ee-TIL-ee. Italy. *EE-TIL-EE.*

Chile.

One of the girls in class--Nikola--speaks five languages. Spanish, unfortunately, isn't one of them. She's German, in fact. Tall, stick-thin--no shape. Her hair is blue-black but dyed, obviously, as there is a quarter-inch of blond growing out along her centre parting. Her real eyebrows are almost completely plucked away and she draws fake brows over her eyes with black pencil. Nikola only wears low-cut, sleeveless shirts. Short, tight skirts. Her legs and armpits are covered with coarse, blond hair.

There is Katja--from Poland, apparently. Though listening to her talk in class, I would have guessed she came from England. In her voice, there is no trace of a Polish accent--nothing remotely Slavic--and her grammar is impeccable. Katja dominates the history class. She's good with dates, good at analyzing events. A brain, actually. Katja is a total *brain.* She never takes her eye off the teacher, Mr. Afseth. Never talks out of turn. Never smiles.

Shelagh is bright, too. Bright in class. Bright blue eyes, bright red hair. But foul-mouthed and hot-tempered. Two or three times during each class, Mr. Afseth has to remind Shelagh to clean up her language. I don't mind it myself. Shelagh is Irish-Catholic, from Belfast. Even when she's swearing, I like to listen to the lilt in her voice, the rhythm of her language.

We almost never hear Hannah's voice. She's quiet--soft-spoken when she does speak. She sits beside me, alternately chewing her fingernails and the end of her pen. Her hair is black--*real* black, not dyed; sometimes she takes a strand of it in her fingers and twirls. When I glance over at Hannah's paper, I see that she takes notes from right to left--in Hebrew, I think. She is from Israel.

After History, I try to strike up conversations with the other scholarship students. Three days in a row I try. Three days in a row, the girls brush past me, rushing to get to their next class. The other scholarship students are all taking the same subjects. They have identical schedules. I'm the only scholarship student in my English class--the only scholarship student in my French, Environmental Studies and Economics classes. In Music, I'm the only student *period.*

As a senior music student--as *the* senior music student--I have four teachers, four practice rooms and four pianos at my disposal. Mrs. McLachlan teaches the practical part of the course; Mrs. Thom does ear-training, sight-singing and melodic dictation. Mr. Wallace is in charge of all the theory--basic theory, harmony, counterpoint, and composition. Mrs. Dlamini covers the history of world music. During the evening study period, I'm the sole student allowed outside the hostel. To practice, after all, I need a piano.

On my way to and from the practice rooms, music books pressed against my chest, I pass by Katja's door--Katja is the smartest and the toughest of the scholarship students, the ringleader. Every study period, the other scholarship girls congregate in Katja's cubie. They stay in her room all evening--through free time, check-in and then long past lights-out. I can hear them as I walk through the corridor. Sometimes I linger outside Katja's room, working up the courage to knock, hoping that the door will open on its own, magically, and that the girls inside will clear a space for me on the bed.

I've looked into Katja's cubie before--once when she skipped out to shower, once when she was filling her cup with water from the corridor kettle. Her walls are plastered with maps of Eastern Europe, maps of Poland. There are black and white photos of Katja and a man--her boyfriend, probably--in dark, heavy coats, holding hands as they stand next to a sign that says SOLIDARNOSC. Over her bed, she's hung a poster of Lech Walesa. For a bedspread she uses a giant Polish flag, its red and white bands lying vertically down the length of her bed--red and white, just like the Canadian flag.

Shelagh is the one who catches me late one night, a week into the term. I'm pacing outside Katja's door, determined to knock. Planning my entrance.

Don't be shy now, says Shelagh as she leads me into Katja's cubie. We've been wanting you to join us for days now but you're always off in the music room.

Maria gets up from the chair beside Katja's desk, motioning for me to take her seat. Nikola hands me an empty ceramic cup and Shelagh reaches into Katja's cupboard for a bottle tucked under a pile of clothes. Katja and Hannah are stretched out on the bed, both smoking and sipping from ceramic cups. Shelagh lights two cigarettes at once, then offers one to me.

While all of this goes on, the girls keep talking--the conversation never stops--as though nothing has happened. Nothing at all. But I feel my spirits lifting--physically *lifting*--swelling up into my chest, warming my cheeks. Soaring through the cubie.

I don't actually like vodka much--two summers ago, before a beerfest, Tanya Yuzko and I downed twenty-six ounces of it in an hour. We both threw up for two days straight. Makes for a funny story, I think--I'm about to tell it, in fact, when the girls start talking politics. Sharing stories from home, about events that have changed their lives.

Nikola goes first. Her chin trembles as she describes the demolition of the Berlin Wall, the first time she set eyes on her aunts and uncles and cousins from East Berlin. Katja breaks in, telling us about the last few months in Poland--the rise of the Solidarity party, the introduction of democracy. The celebrations in the streets.

Katja's eyes are bloodshot. While she talks, she refills her cup with vodka.

We never thought we'd see them, says Nikola. Never in our lifetimes.

Maria places her tiny hand on Nikola's arm.

You're lucky, says Maria, rubbing the crucifix that hangs around her neck. So lucky. My uncle--my father's brother, a member of the local trade union--he disappeared a few weeks after Pinochet took over the country. We pray for him but--

Shelagh nods. I know, she says. You pray and you pray. You wear your bloody fucking *knees* out praying. And what comes of it? Let me tell you something. Twelve years ago, two cousins of mine were taken from their homes. IRA sympathizers, both of them. Praying in the wrong bloody church. Could've been my brothers, my father. A few years later and it could have been my husband. For twelve years, I've watched my aunts and uncles pray. I've listened to them pray. *Twelve years*. I prayed with them for the longest bloody time. Got down on my fucking hands and knees praying with them. Well, fuck of a lot of good it's done! So, let me tell you something else: I'm not doing it anymore. I'm not praying *anymore*. I've fucking well had it up to fucking *here* with prayer!

Shelagh waves her hand over her head.

Hannah looks down at her hands. You can't stop praying, she says, quietly. You just can't. You can't give up what you believe in, who you are. You've got to fight for it.

And you're willing to do it? says Shelagh. You're willing to fight?

I've got no choice, Hannah says with a shrug. In Israel, military service is compulsory. For everyone. Male or female. When I go back home to Tel Aviv, I spend two years in the army.

Katja downs the vodka in her cup, pours herself another shot. Her eyes settle on me.

There is silence in Katja's cubie. Awful silence. Everyone in the room has spoken --everyone except me. I look down into my cup, swishing the vodka clockwise, counter-clockwise, clockwise. In my mind, I run through my family's history, searching for something horrible. Some kind of real oppression or injustice. Some tragedy.

If only we were--I don't know--French-Canadian, maybe. *Quebecois*. Then I could bring up the FLQ Crisis. If we were Native then I could talk about self-government, land claims, racism. Reserves. Or if we were Métis. The Métis don't even have reserves.

Shelagh, I think, can sense my discomfort because she changes the subject abruptly--starts talking about our classes, our teachers. The academic workload at the college. In order to graduate, each of us has to complete a project--a thesis of sorts. Extended Essay, it's called. E^2. All of the teachers have been encouraging us to pick our topics early, to get started on our research as soon as possible. Shelagh asks if anyone has thought about the E^2.

As the other girls answer Shelagh's question, my stomach turns. I haven't given my Extended Essay a moment's consideration.

Hannah is going to examine the events leading up to the Beijing Massacre in Tiananmen Square, June 4, 1989--from a feminist perspective. Maria lets out shriek of approval. For her E^2, Maria is going to analyze the role of Nicaraguan women in the Sandinistas. At the moment, Katja is undecided--something to do with the fall of communism in Poland. Maybe an in-depth study of the Catholic Church's involvement with Solidarity? She's not sure. Shelagh thinks she might look at mourning in Irish Nationalist poetry. Nikola wants to focus on the Berlin Wall--specifically, on the graffiti of the Berlin Wall. Graffiti as art, art as politics.

And we're right back where we started.

Let's hear from our Canadian friend, shall we? says Katja, lifting her cup in my direction. A Polish accent is creeping into her speech now, and she's slurring her words a little.

You can speak, I assume? Katja pours more vodka into her cup.

Shelagh touches my leg, ignoring Katja. Yes, Colleen, she says. Are you going to do something related to music?

Music? I repeat. Yes, music. Definitely music. Probably Ukrainian music.

Without thinking, I blurt out the words--the first words that pop into my head--anything to fill the cubie with my voice.

Really, says Katja, staring me straight in the eye. Ukrainian music.

You mean, *classical* music? says Hannah. By Ukrainian composers?

Sounds fascinating, says Nikola. From what perspective?

Where will you do research? says Maria.

The questions make me dizzy. Or maybe the vodka. I squirm in my chair, trying to dream up a political angle. The suppression of Ukrainian music by--Tsar Nicholas II. By Lenin. By Stalin?

Ukrainian folk music, I say, gulping down the rest of the vodka in my cup--for courage, to buy time. In *Canada*, I add, the vodka burning my throat. Ukrainian-*Canadian* folk music, I mean. You know. Over the last--well--from the turn of the century, I guess. To the present day.

Shelagh gives me a nod of encouragement, Maria and Hannah smile. Katja yawns. I continue, gaining momentum as I go.

I'll be looking at traditional songs, traditional instruments--melodies and harmonic structures. Using songbooks. And recordings, to some extent. To understand the ways in which the old music has changed--evolved, I suppose--in the new world. In Canada, I mean. Under the influence--the *oppressive* influence--of dominant, Anglo-Canadian culture.

I sit back in my chair, relieved. Relaxed. Not bad for spur of the moment. Not bad at all.

Katja leans forward. And, she says, you've chosen this topic because--?

Because I'm Ukrainian, I say.

Oh. Katja crosses her arms over her chest. I thought you were Canadian.

Both, I say. I'm both, actually. Ukrainian-Canadian.

Dual citizenship, two passports, says Hannah, turning toward Katja.

No. I shake my head. I've got just one passport, one *Canadian* passport. But my grandparents immigrated to Canada from Ukraine. So--

So you're not Ukrainian, then, Katja says. Your *grandparents* are Ukrainian. *You* are not.

I feel my face turn bright red. My ears start to burn.

No, I say. I'm Ukrainian-*Canadian*. It's h-hard to explain.

Try. Katja drinks from her cup, her eyes focused on me.

I clear my throat.

Come on, says Katja. Explain it to us. Explain it to *me*. Please. I'm wondering what it feels like to be Ukrainian.

Well, I say, It feels just like--well, I'm sure it doesn't feel any different than--

Any different than *what*? says Katja, interrupting me. Come on. How does it feel? You said you were Ukrainian. How does it *feel*? To know that your people are traitors. That they betray their fellow countrymen without concern, without conscience.

What do you mean? I ask, my palms sweating.

I mean Kiev, says Katja. 1941. Do you read your own history? Maybe not. It was, of course, long ago. When your people were still--how would you say it?--Ukrainian-*Ukrainian*. Before they came to the--what was your phrase?--the new world. To sing songs.

Katja chuckles.

What the fuck are you talking about, Katja? says Shelagh.

I'm talking about thirty thousand Jews systematically murdered by the Nazi regime in Kiev, says Katja. I'm talking about countless numbers of Ukrainians who collaborated with the Nazis, who turned their backs on their own people. Ukrainians. Anti-Semitic, the lot of them. Hunting Jews out of hiding in Ukraine. They did it all over Poland, too. Ukrainian soldiers hunting Ukrainian Jews, Polish Jews--then standing by to watch them die.

You're wrong, I say, my voice trembling. My grandparents weren't there. They never lived in Kiev. They were farmers. They moved to Canada before the war, years before. In 1899.

Right, Katja says, nodding her head. *Right*. Brave settlers taming the wild west. Stealing land from the--

Enough! Shelagh glares at Katja. What the fuck is *up* with you?

Just as many Poles settled in Canada, I say. Maybe more.

No one I know, says Katja, shaking her head. No one from my family. My grandparents didn't run like cowards from the Communists. They *stayed*. They committed themselves to the--

All *right*, Katja! Shelagh breaks in. Jesus-fucking-*Christ*, could you shut your bloody trap already and let us talk about something else? Christ.

But I'm already halfway out the cubie door. Katja pours herself another drink as I go. The other girls--Hannah, Maria, Nikola--keep their eyes on the floor.

Wait, Colleen! says Shelagh, following me up the corridor.

As I fumble with the keys to my cubie door, my eyes blurred with tears, Shelagh places her hand on my shoulders. I shake it away.

I'm sorry, Colleen. Really, I'm sorry. Katja was out of line--way out of line. You didn't deserve that. No one deserves that. She just had too much to drink. Give her the night to sober up, tomorrow morning she'll be apologizing. I'll make sure of it.

A week passes. Two weeks.

Katja never does apologize. In history class, she won't even look at me. Shelagh sits with me at breakfast sometimes, in the mornings; she says that Katja is too proud to say she's sorry. Every so often, two or three of the other girls drop by to visit me. We talk about the weather, our history assignments--no one mentions the incident in Katja's cubie.

But I can't forget it, can't put it out of my mind. I think about Katja all the time, and the things that she said to me. Finally, after study period one evening, I slip into the college library, diary in hand. My plan is to spend the next few nights poring over European history books until I find dates, names, places--some injustice to incriminate the Poles. A transgression against Ukraine would be ideal. Anything to write in my diary, then throw in Katja's face.

There aren't many books to choose from. Nearly all of the college history books are devoted to South African history. They're organized under tiny cardboard headings. *Archeology: Rock Paintings. Early History to 1500. Arrival of the Europeans. British Conquest. The Mfecane. The Difaqane. The Great Trek. The Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902). The Establishment of South Africa. Apartheid. The African National Congress. The Anti-Pass Campaign and The Sharpeville Massacre. Black Consciousness and The Soweto Massacre.*

Under the *World History* heading, I find two Polish books. One skinny paperback about the history of Polish aviation and a hardcover biography of Jozef Poniatowski, some eighteenth century Polish hero. I come across three or four World War II history books, too, and I run my finger down each Table of Contents, each Index, looking for the word *Poland* or the word *Ukraine*. I find *Auschwitz. Gdansk. Majdanek, Treblinka. Warsaw Uprising*. Nothing about Polish people committing injustice. Nothing about Ukrainians committing injustice, either, in 1941, in Kiev. Nothing at all about Ukrainians.

This is stupid, I tell myself, slipping the World War II books back into the shelf. Juvenile. Playing into Katja's hand, stooping to her level: it's childish and it's *stupid*.

What do I care about events that occurred fifty years ago? Nothing. What does any of it have to do with me? Nothing.

That's when I find something--a book tucked into the bottom of the shelf marked *Agriculture and Forestry*. Somebody made an error with the book; some librarian miscategorized it. I wouldn't have noticed it at all, in fact, except that the book is enormous--five inches thick, at least--and there is a drawing of embroidery on its spine. With two hands, I lift it from the shelf, lug it across the library to a carol. *Ukraine: A History*. The book is brand new. I must be the first person to open its cover.

No, not the first. Someone has written on the title page. *A donation from E. Shabalala to the students of Waterford-Kamhlaba.*

Ukraine: A History is a reference book, though, so I'm not permitted to take it out of the library. Three nights in a row, then, during free time before check-in, I sit in the library, leafing through the pages of the book, scribbling notes on the pages of my diary. Some sentences--some entire paragraphs--I take down word for word; some I paraphrase. I record all of the corresponding page numbers, the author's name, the copyright information--everything. For Katja. So that she can double check, if she chooses. So that she knows every word is true.

There is more information in *Ukraine: A History* than I ever dreamed I'd find. When I've finished, twelve pages of my diary are covered in my handwriting--covered with dates, facts, names. In my cubie, I recopy all of it, neatly, organizing it chronologically, underlining the words *Poland*, *Polish*, and *Poles*.

History of Ukraine, especially Western Ukraine: marked by centuries of domination by Tsarist Russia; by Austro-Hungarian Empire; by White Russians; by Bolsheviks; by Germany's Nazi Regime; by Poland.

1340-1366. Polish King Casimir the Great leads Polish forces in the occupation of Galicia and Volhynia.

1500's. Ukrainian nobles assimilated to Polish culture and religion. Ukrainian language and customs, as well as Orthodox religion, therefore increasingly associated with the lower classes of Ukraine.

1600's. Five major Cossack/peasant revolts against Polish aristocracy. All suppressed.

1831. Polish uprising in Ukraine

1863. Polish uprising in Ukraine.

November, 1918 - July, 1919. Polish-Ukrainian War. Polish troops (experienced in W.W. I battle) easily defeat Ukrainian army of volunteers (teenaged boys, mostly, and peasants, without without arms, without food, without shoes).

1920. Poland declares that it will protect the rights of Ukrainians and other minority groups living within its borders.

1924. Entente Powers, through League of Nations, declare Poland's right to Galicia in Western Ukraine. Ethnically "pure" Polish settlers given Ukrainian land. Ukrainian language periodicals abolished. Ukrainian cultural organizations banned. Ukrainian language schools shut down. Laws passed to ban use of language in government agencies

Autumn, 1930. Poland's "Pacification" or "Pasifikatsia" campaign against Ukrainians in Galicia. Ukrainian buildings and monuments demolished. Ukrainians arrested, beaten, tortured, denied medical care. Hundreds die, hundreds more suffer permanent, debilitating injuries.

1934. Polish government takes back promise made to League of Nations to protect rights of minority groups in Poland. Polish officials establish concentration camp at Bereza Kartazka for Ukrainian nationalists.

It's past midnight when I make my way to Katja's cubie, stack of papers in hand, heart beating fast. The corridor is dark and quiet, for the most part. Outside Katja's room, I can hear hushed voices and smell cigarette smoke--the scholarship girls, like clockwork, have gathered again. For some time, I stand outside Katja's door, unsure of how to proceed. I could leave the pages outside her door, or slip them under her door, or tack them to her door. I could barge in, making a dramatic, impromptu speech about Katja's ignorance and her people's cruelty.

In the end, I settle on knocking. A second later, the cubie door opens and Katja appears. Behind her, I see the other girls--some sitting, some lying--around the room, their eyes wide.

Katja, I say. You didn't do your homework.

Katja looks puzzled. Katja the brain, the straight-A student. The head of the class. When has Katja ever been caught with her homework not done?

Tell you what, I say, handing her the sheets of paper covered in my handwriting. *You can copy mine.*

***

This, I think, is how art forms die. How they fade into history, into the past--how they are snuffed out and forgotten. Someone comes up with a brilliant idea, a way to bleach eggs whiter and than white, and before long--overnight, really--the world is rid of *pysanky*. Forever.

I wake early to check the status of my second egg, my spring *pysanka*, in the yellow dye. On its white shell, I've drawn two horizontal bands--one near the top of the egg, one near the bottom; between the bands, three large diamonds; within the diamonds, deer. Two deer per diamond, their eyeless, oval heads facing each other; parallel to each band, a *bezkonechnyk*, a meandering line with no beginning and no ending. I planned to add a green meadow to each diamond, beneath the stick-legs of the deer, and a blazing, orange sun over the stick-antlers, and red roses at the bottom and top of the egg. Deer are supposed to symbolize prosperity and wealth. Roses represent love. Continuous lines celebrate the eternal rebirth and renewal of the natural world.

But the art of *pysanky*-making is dying--my chances of making money are slipping away--before my very eyes. After fourteen hours in the yellow dye, my spring *pysanka* is still white. A slightly jaundiced white, actually--somewhere between light beige and pale yellow. Normally, the dye catches in a matter of minutes--ten minutes, fifteen. Twenty minutes at the most.

Of course, a less experienced *pysanka*-maker might blame the dye, then waste time and energy mixing up a new batch. I know better. My yellow dye is fine--all of my dyes are fine. The colours on my first *pysanka* are rich and warm; on my first *pysanka*, the dyes caught quickly. My second egg is the problem. My second egg is a dud. And the remaining eggs in the carton? I can't gamble with them, can't play Russian Roulette with ten potential duds. Someone has meddled with them. Who knows how many have been scoured with chemicals, with detergents, with whitening agents?

With my spring *pysanka* in hand, I pull the garbage can out from under the kitchen sink. The egg is done--finished, ruined. Good for nothing. *History*. I can't even eat it. Submerging an egg in dye renders its white and its yolk inedible. I drop the egg, watch it crack into pieces, decapitating two deer, slicing the *bezkonechnyk* in three places. A puddle of egg white collects inside a coffee filter, over still-wet grinds. Several shards of shell pierce the yolk-sac, spreading thick yellow--bright yellow--over cigarette butts and orange peels. The rest of Paraska's carton, at least, can be eaten.

As I heat up the frying pan on the stove, I curse Paraska. She had to have known that the eggs were washed--that washed eggs are useless. She knew, and she didn't warn me. She knew but she wanted to--test me? To test my *pysanky*-making expertise, yes, and my committment to the art form. Paraska gave me bad eggs to challenge me, to see what kind of Ukrainian I really am. Do I give up on *pysanky* at the first sign of trouble? Do I turn my back on tradition and run from it with my tail between my legs? Or do I stand my ground and fight?

Pysanky, from the word *pysaty*, to write. How long have people--have women--been making writing on eggs? Two thousand, five thousand years. Maybe longer. Pagan, illiterate Ukrainians were writing on eggs for centuries before the coming of Christ; they kept making *pysanky* after the adoption of Christianity--when?--in the ninth century or the tenth, and on through a thousand years of domination by Tatar-Mongols and Russians, and annexation by Lithuania, then Poland, then the Austro-Hungarian Empire, then Poland again, and Nazi Germany, and the U.S.S.R.

I drop a teaspoon of butter onto the hot frying pan, watch it warm and spread.

Let Paraska test me--I'll show her. Toronto is a big city, I'll pass with flying colors. *Pysanky* haven't survived a millennium of oppression in the Old Country--haven't survived a mass migration across the ocean to the New World--only to disappear here, in Toronto, because of a few bad eggs. I can find good eggs anywhere--unpolluted, uncontaminated eggs, still speckled with chicken shit to prove that they've never been washed. At a farmer's market, maybe, or at a health food store. I'll have fresh farm eggs by the end of the day; by the end of the week, they will be transformed into *pysanky*.

Breakfast. With one hand, I lift the frying pan from the stove, turning it so that the melted butter covers its surface. When the pan is evenly covered, I lift two eggs from Paraska's carton. Then, one at a time, I break the eggs against the side of the frying pan and, with my hands suspended over the stove, I watch each tidy mass of yolk and white slip from its shell like a thing being born.

***

Monday. February 12. Мондей. Февруері Твелвт.

The day starts like any--like every--other. Five-forty-three and water is running in the bathroom down the hall. A half-dozen girls--always the same half-dozen African girls--are singing their hearts out in the shower. Singing African songs at the top of their lungs. They are early risers. Morning people. I am not.

Sometimes I wrap a pillow around my ears, to block out the sound of their voices. Sometimes I pull the blankets over my head, try my hardest to go back to sleep. Nothing works, nothing helps. By a quarter to six, my eyes are open. I'm dead tired--my limbs heavy and stiff--but wide awake. Other groups of girls--the late-night coffee-drinkers, the pillow-fighters, the *dagga*-smokers--keep me up at night. And then, lest I sneak in a nap before dinner, there are the afternoon sport fanatics traipsing up and down the corridor for two hours straight fetching squash rackets and soccer cleats and bathing costumes and *God*-knows-what.

Five-forty-nine and I'm out of bed, seething mad. Dressed by six--still angry--with nothing to do until seven, when the dining hall opens for business. So I fix myself a cup of instant coffee. From under a pile of books on my desk, I grab my diary, the latest issue of *Maclean's*. I bring my guitar, too, in case I'm struck by the inspiration to write a song. And then I make my way to the hill behind the hostel.

The senior hostel and the dining hall are one U-shaped building connected by a long corridor. At the midpoint of the corridor, two sets of doors open onto opposite sides of the building--on one side, there is the quadrangular courtyard, where students gather between meals and classes; on the other side, a hill overlooking the maintenance area.

Students stay away from the maintenance area--away from the laundry building, where we send our dirty clothes once a week to be cleaned and dried and pressed by Swazi women with babies tied to their backs. Away from the gardeners' building, where the grass-cutters and hedge-trimmers keep their equipment, take their meals. Away from the dining hall kitchen--attached to the dining hall itself--where our food is brought and where our food is prepared and where our dishes are washed.

In the mornings, though, I like to sit here, above the maintenance area, away from the rest of the students. I like the sounds here. Water drumming against the sides of galvanized steel washtubs, forks and spoons clattering against plates and cups. Lawnmower engines sputtering, roaring, sputtering, dying.

I get *Maclean's* second-hand, from home. In care packages. Twice now--twice in one month--I've received a care package from home. It's almost embarrassing. In the senior hostel, only three people have received letters. No one else has yet to receive a package.

My packages aren't small, either. Each one contains fourteen letters--seven each from Mom and Dad, written daily--plus Hallmark greeting cards from Sophie, postcards from Wes. There are photos and fresh film for my camera. Snickers bars, jars of peanut butter, bags of Oreo cookies. Soda crackers. Copies of the *St. Paul Journal* to keep me up-to-date on the local news, and issues of *Maclean's* magazine. For Canadian current events.

On the hill behind the hostel, I open the latest issue of *Maclean's*. Which isn't, in fact, the latest issue at all. Packages from home take nearly two weeks to arrive. Today, February 12, I'm reading the February 2 issue.

The commotion begins as I am reading about recent developments in South Africa --the unbanning of several political parties. The African National Congress, the Pan African Congress. The South African Communist Party.

From behind me--from within the senior hostel--comes the shrieking of voices, male and female. There is hardly time to close the magazine before girls start spilling out of the hostel doors onto the hill--onto *my* hill--overlooking the maintenance area. Some of the girls are crying--wailing, really--and all of the senior boys are chanting as they fill the quad, lifting their knees to their chests and stamping their feet to the ground. From beside me--from the kitchen--there is cheering and singing. The kitchen workers rattle spoons inside pots. Gardeners and laundry women rush out of their respective buildings to find out what has happened.

I follow the crowd too, diary and magazine and guitar in hand, watching the other students, listening--afraid to stop someone. Afraid to ask what's going on. Everybody seems to know--the students, the workers. I should know, too. February 12. Is it a national holiday? Maybe they just heard the news--about the political parties, the unbanning.

A few senior South African boys are setting out stereos and microphones and loudspeakers around the courtyard and in the assembly hall. Within minutes, African music is blaring throughout the campus--I can feel the bass drum and the bass guitar thumping under my feet. Several groups of African girls are spreading long sheets of paper across the lawn in the quad, using wide brushes to make banners of yellow, green, and black. ANC colours. From time to time, one of the South African guys presses a microphone to his lips. Over the music, he calls out, *Amandla!* The girls stop painting, drop their brushes. They thrust their right fists into the air. *Awetu*!

By the time the assembly starts, at eight o'clock sharp, I've figured it out. Actually, one of the African girls' banners *spelled* it out.

NELSON MANDELA! FREE AT LAST!

I'm excited--excited as everyone else at the college--to bear witness to this historic event, to *history*. With my guitar at my feet, my books in my lap, I watch the assembly hall come alive with laughter and spontaneous singing. Students dance in the aisles, up on the benches, in front of the stage. Mr. Harrington tries for five full minutes to bring the student body to order, and when he has succeeded in settling the crowd, he has only a few seconds to declare that all classes are canceled before the auditorium roars again with cheering and whistling and applause. The energy--the elation--is contagious.

After Mr. Harrington's announcement, the students take over the assembly. The microphone is open for anyone to use. Theo, a senior South African student, starts by reading aloud the history of apartheid in South Africa. The assembly hall falls silent as Theo speaks. He talks about the first white government formed by the National Party in

1948; the 1960 Anti-Pass Campaign, which resulted in the Sharpeville Massacre--sixty-nine people killed by the white regime--and the banning of black political parties like the ANC and the PAC. He talks about the rise of Black Consciousness, the banning of poets and novelists and musicians and political leaders.

It seems incredible to me that Theo has no speech prepared--no paper in front of him, no notes whatsoever. And at first, I listen--carefully--taking mental note of everything that he is saying. But there are too many names, too many dates--1961, 1963, Rivonia, 1976, Soweto Uprising, BikoSiSuluThambo, 1985. I can't keep track of it all. How does he?

When Theo has finished, Nhlanhla, another senior student, steps up to the microphone to recite several poems he's written--about growing up black in South Africa, in Soweto. His poems are more like stories--about sitting in an unheated classroom in winter with forty-five other students, twenty textbooks to share between them; about being forced to learn Afrikaans; about the older brother he never knew--Sipho--shot and killed by a white soldier on June 16--shot and killed like hundreds of other school kids--during the 1976 Soweto Uprising.

What exactly, I wonder, is the Soweto Uprising? Theo mentioned it. Nhlanhla mentioned it. I've never heard of it.

Nhlanhla's last poem is about Mandela's sacrifice for the black people of South Africa, his twenty-seven year prison sentence on Robben Island. Nhlanhla calls Mandela a black Jesus Christ, giving his life to black people everywhere.

Then there is Robert, a boy in Form One--brave, I think. The only junior student to address the assembly. He reads a short story whose main character is a little coloured boy named Bobby. Bobby receives an invitation to a friend's birthday party--a white friend's birthday party. Bobby buys a special gift for his friend. Dressed in his Sunday best, Bobby goes to the birthday party in the white area of town. Only, when the white friend's white mother discovers that Bobby is coloured, she won't let him into the house. Robert's hand--the hand that holds the paper--trembles as he reads, his voice quivers. It's a true story, I'm sure. Autobiography.

The only girl to stand up to the microphone is Natasha--a Form Five student, I think. She speaks slowly as she shares the details of her best friend's death eleven years ago. This, too, is no work of fiction. Natasha was *there*--walking home from school hand-in-hand with her friend when, for one reason or another, the friend stepped out onto the road. At precisely that moment, an ambulance happened to be passing and it struck her--struck Natasha's friend--leaving the little girl bleeding and unconscious. *Literally* leaving her, Natasha explains.

By now, there are tears in my eyes because I know that the friend is going to die.

According to Natasha, the ambulance that struck her friend was a "Whites Only" ambulance. So the ambulance driver raced away from the scene of the accident--to call a second ambulance. But by the time the "Black" ambulance arrived, Natasha's friend had stopped breathing. Her heart had stopped beating.

I cry quietly for the next few minutes, hardly listening to the next stories and speeches. There are girls sniffling all around me, dabbing their eyes with tissues. By the time I've pulled myself together enough to focus again on the stage, Mr. Harrington is paying tribute to Nelson Mandela.

Let us never forget, he says, the suffering of this great man. Let us remember the *years* that he gave to us, the *years* that he gave to all the people of South Africa, white and black. Let us celebrate his role in the struggle for freedom in South Africa!

The assembly hall breaks into applause.

Let us celebrate his *leadership* in the struggle for freedom in South Africa!

More applause, cheering. Whistles.

Let us celebrate his *achievements* in the struggle for freedom in South Africa!

Students pound the benches with their fists, stamp their feet. They stand up, clapping their hands high over their heads.

Freedom for South Africa! Freedom for Mandela!

Mr. Harrington raises his voice to a feverish pitch over the cheering of the crowd. His face is red now, veins are bulging in his neck.

Amandla! he yells.

Awetu! the crowd explodes, hundreds of fists raised.

Then several senior girls rush the stage, ANC banners in hand. They tack the banners onto the curtains at the back of the stage. At the front of the stage, ten senior boys in gumboots line up in a row; a group of forty or fifty students from the lower and the upper forms crowd in behind them. Waist-high cowhide drums are pulled from the wings. One of the Spanish teachers runs onstage with his guitar. Mrs. McLachlan rolls out the college piano.

Thandiwe leads the singing; everyone onstage joins in. Thandiwe--the girl who, four weeks ago, offered to iron my clothes. But Thandiwe's singing voice is nothing like her speaking voice. I remember her talking to me beside the ironing board in a high-pitched half-whisper--she hardly parted her lips then. Now, her jaw is dropped, her throat open, and she is filling the assembly hall with her song. Hers is a woman's voice, deep and full with a rich, controlled vibrato. She stands with her legs spread wide, back arched. Chin lifted. There is power in her voice, in her posture, in her stance. Thandiwe's whole body is singing.

Listening from my spot up near the top of the assembly hall, it seems to me that she's rehearsed this--that they've all rehearsed this. Surely. There are two, maybe three hundred voices in total now--onstage and off--singing song after song in tune, in four-part harmony. Not just singing but dancing, too. Girls swinging their hips and their arms in perfect time, boys lifting their knees to their chests. As though their movements were choreographed. And after nearly every song, the fists. The rousing refrain.

Amandla!

Awetu!

Amandla!

Awetu!

Over the course of the singing, more students and teachers flood down the steps of the assembly hall in groups of two and three until the stage is packed tight with bodies. Katja and Nikola , I notice, are among the first to go running down to the front, their fists raised. Maria follows, holding hands with Hannah. Shelagh trails behind.

Before long, the assembly hall benches are almost completely empty. Everyone, it seems, is onstage--some with their arms around each other as they sing, some holding hands and dancing. Everyone except me, it seems. I feel ridiculous--sitting alone, mute, while the others perform. Sitting with my guitar beside me--my mute guitar in its unopened case. I feel as though my face is glowing white.

It's different, of course, for other white students--the scholarship students like Maria, Nikola, Katja. They have a right to be onstage, they've been oppressed. They *belong*. I don't. I've never survived hardships or struggles or strife. I stay seated. As the celebration continues onstage, I open my diary across my lap. Try to look busy with writing.

On the bench in front of me, another girl is also still seated. I hadn't noticed her before. She looks familiar to me--an IB student, I think--though I have no classes with her. She is writing, too--drawing, actually--in a small sketchbook bound with metal rings. With a charcoal pencil, she is making lines--smudging them with the back of her fist--making more lines. Her arms and hands are freckled. From time to time, her hair--long, pale yellow--falls over her eyes. To sweep back her hair, she can't use her hands--they're covered in charcoal. Instead, she throws her head back and to the side, swinging her hair over her shoulder.

She's drawing a globe, I think. Her picture is only half-finished. Political art, I suppose. A new world--new because apartheid is collapsing, because Mandela is free. Not a very subtle symbol, really. But the girl is talented, obviously. Technically speaking, at least.

Are you spying on me?

The girl swings her hair as she turns around. Green eyes. Cheeks, forehead, nose covered in freckles. There is teasing, not anger, in her voice. And she's Australian. Her accent is a giveaway.

Just admiring your art work, I say.

A*r*t wo*r*k, she repeats, enunciating her r's. You're American, aren't you?

I wince.

Oops, she says. Sorry. Canadian, then?

I nod.

I know how it feels, she says, climbing up over her bench to sit beside me. I was born in New Zealand and raised in New Zealand mostly. I've only ever been to Australia twice. But when people hear me talk, they just assume I'm an Aussie. Drives me nuts.

While the singing onstage continues, we introduce ourselves, shake hands. Her name is Rosalind Russell. I can call her Rosalind or Rosa. Or Russell, even. Anything but Rose. She won't answer to Rose.

Rose, she says, is an old lady's name. The kind of old lady who wears flowered house-dresses and puts a blue rinse through her hair every month--

And has a mustache, I say, laughing as I finish Rosa's sentence.

Whiskers growing out of a mole on her chin. Rosa giggles.

Onstage, the drumming stops.

We've been caught. I'm sure of it. Caught talking about trivial things on a historic day when we should be singing and dancing onstage. I feel suddenly nauseous.

But as Rosa and I turn our attention to the front of the assembly hall, Thandiwe starts another song--no drums, no guitar or piano. She sings the first line by herself, *Nkosi sikelel'i Afrika*, then the other voices join in.

It's the African National Anthem, Rosa whispers. Sacred song.

Why aren't you up there? I whisper back.

Rosa shrugs her shoulders. I just don't feel that it's *my* celebration, she says, still whispering.

For a moment, we listen. The girls onstage sing, *Woza moya*. The boys echo back, *Woza moya*.

How about you? says Rosa. Why aren't you up there?

I shrug. Same reason, I say.

Nkosi sikelela

Thina lusapho lwayo

What about your drawing, though? I give Rosa a poke to get her attention. Your drawing, I whisper. Your *globe*. Isn't it sort of a celebration of a new world? A new world free from injustice?

What? Rosa looks confused.

I try to repeat myself but the singing is too loud now.

Sechaba saheso

Sechaba sa Afrika

The songs ends. There are more *Amandla - Awetu* calls. The assembly draws to a close. Mr. Harrington announces that there will be a half-hour break followed by more celebrations in the assembly hall.

Your *globe*, I say to Rosa, pointing to her sketch book as we stroll back to the hostel. It's a celebration of a new world free from injustice. Right?

Oh, my *embryo*! says Rosa. Yes, I suppose it *does* look something like a globe, doesn't it? But--no. Sorry to disappoint you. It's an embryo, not a globe. A little baby fetus. Nothing political about it, I'm afraid. I don't do political art, it's just not my thing. I'm sort of infatuated with embryos and fetuses. What's the plural of fetus? *Feti*?

She laughs.

Come on, she says. Let me show you something.

Rosa's cubie is wall-to-wall embryos. She's drawn them in pencil crayon, in oil pastels. In ink. Over her desk, there are dozens of charcoal sketches--each circular, filled with swirls of black-and-white fluid and one tiny, rounded body. In every drawing, the face is featureless, save for an eye, a nose, half-formed. The hands are more detailed--long, delicate fingers reaching out beyond the walls of the womb. Above her bed there are plump watercolour embryos in pale blues and pinks and greens. They have enormous heads--smiling mouths on these faces--and shrunken bodies. Some are underwater, surrounded by coral and seaweed and fish of all sizes. Words rise out from the lips of one embryo settled on a sand-yellow sea-floor--out rise the words, passing up the womb, out the top of the womb, into the water. *Hello fish! Hello fish!*

She has several darker pieces leaning up against the wall under her desk. Paintings done in oil, I think, because the canvas is textured. The oil embryos are long and thin, their bodies sinewy, fleshless. Their faces grey, wrinkled with age--like the faces of old men and old women. Like corpses, even, wrapped in dark green--almost black--shroud-like layers of womb.

I stare for a long time at Rosa's art, then at Rosa herself--at her freckled face framed by soft, curly tufts of blond. She looks like the girl-next-door, like a cheerleader. Something like Peppermint Patti. How--from *where*--have these creations come? And then, as though she's heard my question, she tells me.

It started about a year, year-and-a-half ago, she says. By accident. I was studying for my A-Levels. Biology, actually. I've got a thing for the sciences--always have. And art, too. Though art is really a *hobby* more than anything. I'm going to be a doctor. My dad and mom are both doctors, and my two aunts. I catch a ton of flack from my parents for taking art, they think it's a colossal waste of time. But I found a way to put my art lessons to use--right there and then, studying for my A-Levels. I started drawing diagrams of zygotes. Have you studied biology?

I nod.

OK, says Rosa, then you know that zygotes are fertilized eggs.

I nod again.

Which eventually become *embryos*, says Rosa. She stops, then, grinning. Waiting for me to respond.

All animals start out as zygotes, she continues. And *all* zygotes look the same. Identical. Id-ent-ic-al. Can you grasp it? Can you see what it *means*? It means that for a brief, beautiful period in their initial developmental stages, every single animal from every single animal species looks identical to every other animal from every other animal species.

But that's political, I say. You said that you don't *do* politics, but that's the most political idea I've ever *heard*. Equality. You're talking about equality.

Uh-uh, Rosa shakes her head. It's science, not politics. Put two animal embryos in front of us, and you or I couldn't tell them apart. Pig, cat, horse, cow, sheep, mule. *Human*. They're all the same. *We* are all the same.

Sounds political, I say. Rosa ignores me.

So when I draw an embryo, she says, I'm not drawing one, single thing. I'm drawing *everything*. Figuratively, I mean. The whole spectrum, the whole taxonomy, of living, breathing creatures--all at once. What artist can say that he--she--has captured the entire living, breathing universe in one picture? What artist in the history of the *world*?

So you really don't see your art as political? I say.

After my first embryo, says Rosa, pointing to a pencil sketch beside her window, there was no going back for me. I knew that I'd found my lifelong passion. The art teachers aren't exactly thrilled about it. They want me to make still-life portraits of--I don't know--cabbages, I think. And avocados, and pears. I mean, *please*. Pears have been done to death. I'm never going to draw anything but embryos. My parents, thank God, are warming up to my art--accepting it, more or less. I told them I'm going to be an OBGYN, specialize in embryos. And I am.

But enough about me! Rosa claps her hands. Get me started on embryos and I can't stop. How about you? she says. What are you into?

I pause, unsure of what to say. I like Rosa. I'd like to impress her. Should I talk about music? Not the same as her embryos, really. I wish that I had a weird, all-consuming, lifelong passion like Rosa. Something that would light up my eyes like Rosa's are lit. Something that could make me sparkle like she's sparkling. I want to sparkle.

Wait a second, says Rosa, before I have a chance to speak. Hold that thought. I want to show you something else--one more thing and then I'm shutting my mouth for good. I promise.

Rummaging in her cupboard, Rosa pulls out a piece of yellow fabric. She spreads it across her bed. There is, in the centre of the cloth, an outline of two embryos, their heads and tails touching to form a complete circle.

I play with different art forms, she says, not just different media. This is my first batik. And my first set of twins!

Rosa tells me that batik is an ancient Indonesian art form--Javanese, in fact, dating back at least two thousand years. Batik, she says, comes from the Javanese word "ambatik," which means drawing and writing. Artists in Java discovered that wax and water repel each other--that portions of fabric covered in wax are protected from dye.

Sure, I say, interrupting her. Like *pysanky*. I know all about it.

Piss-on-*what?* says Rosa.

Pysanky, I repeat. Ukrainian Easter eggs.

Then I talk. I tell Rosa everything that I know about *pysanky*--about Ukrainian women drawing on eggs each spring for two thousand years, maybe longer, with beeswax and *kistky* to celebrate the renewal of the natural world. About vinegar and dyes, and raw farm eggs. I explain that *pysanky*-making is based on the same principles as batik. *Pysanky*. I teach Rosa to pronounce the word properly. When I've finished, Rosa grabs hold of both my hands.

I want to learn, she says. *Teach* me. Will you teach me? Promise you'll teach me.

I try to cut in, to explain that it's not as simple as teaching and learning. There are special materials involved, special tools. Where would we find beeswax and *kistky*? But Rosa doesn't hear me, doesn't listen.

This is fate, she says. You know that? *Destiny*. You think it's an accident? Coincidence? That you just happened to come all this way to Africa, all the way from Canada, to *Swaziland* of all places? No. Uh-uh. It doesn't work that way. This friendship--us--it's all been written in the *stars*, Colleen. Pre-ordained by some higher being. You have been *sent* here to teach me to make embryos *on eggs*.

Rosa and I spend the remainder of the day together. In the morning, when the Mandela celebrations start up again--impromptu readings of banned poetry in the assembly hall, more eye-witness accounts of apartheid in the gymnasium--we take a long walk in the hills behind the school. We skip lunch--share Canadian crackers and peanut butter instead, on the bed in my cubie. Rosa asks about my family and my hometown, about life in Canada. I show her photos of Mom and Dad, Sophie and Wes. Photos of our dog Ralph. Our house. The farm.

Rosa marvels at the closeness in the photos, the affection. She wonders if we are really like this--arms around each other, cheeks pressed together--or if it's put-on for the camera. Posed. Rosa's eldest brother is in London studying medicine, her next-oldest brother works for a computer company in Singapore. There are three of them in the family. Plus her mother and father, of course. But Rosa hasn't lived with her mom and dad--or with her brothers, for that matter--since she was very young. Not since she was sent to boarding school in New Zealand. Her parents established their medical careers in the tropics. They were in Surinam for seven years before Rosa was born; in Tanzania for nine years after she was born. Then two years in Cameroon and two years in Swaziland. For the last three years, Rosa's parents have been working in Zaire. For the last five years, Rosa has been boarding at Waterford.

She can't believe that my family has never never moved. That we've always lived in the same house on the same farm by the same town. That every day--day after day--my brother and sister and I came *home* after school. That we slept under the same roof as our parents. All those years.

I can't believe that she didn't.

Walking into the dining hall for dinner with Rosa at my side, I catch myself smiling. I realize, in fact, that for the first time in more than a month, I'm smiling. Not a forced smile. Not a put-on or posed smile. I look from side to side across the room--at the students and the teachers eating in groups. Yesterday and the day before--and the day before that--I sat alone, pretending not to care that I was sitting alone. Pretending to *enjoy* sitting alone.

Over supper, Rosa asks me to tell her more about my family. More stories from home, about all of my aunts and my uncles, my cousins. Grandparents. Do I see them all the time at home? Do they live close by? Rosa has two grandparents, two aunts and one cousin--in the whole world, they're all she's got. And in her whole life, she's seen her grandparents twice. *Twice*.

What about the eggs, says Rosa. The *pysanky*. Do all the women in your family make them? Do you make them together?

Before I can answer, Rosa leans across the table so that we are nose-to-nose. So that I can hear her whispering. I have to tell you, she says, grinning. I have to tell you about this crazy thought of mine. It's about my twins. My batik twins. I think that they're prophetic. I think that they're *us*. I know it's crazy, I *know*. But I think that I made a drawing of you--you and me, *us*--before I ever even knew that you existed. Is that crazy? I mean, do you think that I've lost my mind completely?

Rosa stops grinning, then, and she stares me straight in the eye. I stare back, too--stare far into her green, green eyes, islands in a sea of freckles. *Is that crazy?*

Slowly and solemnly , I shake my head.

***

I'm on a mission to Chinatown. An egg-seeking mission to the open-air, fresh-food markets of Chinatown.

I've never been to Chinatown before--not in Toronto, at least. When Sophie, Wes, and I were small, though, Mom and Dad took us to a restaurant in Edmonton's Chinatown. Plus I've seen Chinatowns on TV, in movies. And everybody knows that

Chinatowns are all the same, really. Bustling streets lined with restaurants and food stores, sidewalk displays of vegetables and fruit in cardboard bins, eels swimming in tanks filled with salt-water, pork shanks hung on meat hooks. Live chickens in pens, freshly-butchered whole chickens on ice. And eggs. In crates, in bowls, in baskets. Everywhere, *eggs*.

To get to Chinatown, I must go north. I think. North to Dufferin and then some distance east on the Bloor subway line. As far as Spadina, I think. To be sure, I intend to ask someone on the subway for directions.

Two of us board the same subway car at Dufferin Station, a woman and me. She looks a lot like Auntie Natalka--same stocky frame, thick calves, full breasts. Support hose and ankle-high winter boots rimmed with fake fur. The woman takes the seat opposite me, gives me a warm smile. By looking at her, I can tell what kind of woman she is. The kind who will feel sorry for me, lost and alone in Toronto; who will pull a napkin and a pen from her purse so that she can write out detailed directions to Chinatown.

What luck, I think. Destiny, really. To find such a woman on the subway. For such a woman to find *me*. Except that before I have a chance to ask the woman about Chinatown, the subway lurches to a stop. Two more passengers--two men--enter the car, and the Auntie-Natalka-look-alike exits.

I can't ask men for directions--not these men, at least. They're too young, too well built. Neither could be much older than twenty-nine, thirty; one is blond, the other dark-haired. Both wear leather jackets, faded blue jeans, and heavy cologne. I know what sort of men they are, I can tell. Professional-types--lawyers or accountants--the kind of men who go for a jog every morning, or work out in the gym; who *do lunch* with their colleagues; who drink martinis at cocktail parties, and smoke cigars. Their old, faded jeans aren't really old or faded--they were bought bleached, for a hundred and fifty bucks.

The subway rolls past Christie and Bathurst. Maybe if there were one--just one--of them, then I could ask. One isn't so intimidating as two; two are an audience, really. Probably they'd laugh if I asked them for directions to Chinatown--if not in front of me then later, behind my back. *Did you see that country bumpkin? Did you hear her?*

St. George comes and goes, Bay Station. I roll my shoulders forward and backward, take a deep breath--try to look relaxed, at ease. As though I know exactly where I'm going. I roll my head from side to side. For all I know, we've long since passed Chinatown. But I decide that I'll ride the subway until the men get off--I'll ride the subway as long as it takes. All day, if need be. I keep rolling my shoulders forward, backward, up, down.

Forty-five minutes later, we've gone so far east that I'm starting to panic. The two men are lost, now, in the crowd that has formed in the subway car. I've stopped counting the stations we've passed through--Sherbourne, Castle Frank, Broadview. A dozen at least. Chester, Pape, Donlands, Greenview, Coxwell, Woodbine. I'm feeling hot, sweaty. Claustrophobic. I need fresh air, wide open space. I need a glass of water. I have to go to the bathroom. I can't take it, I have to get out. I'm on a mission. I can't ride the goddamn subway forever. I have to go. I have to get out *now*.

Do I say this out loud? The other people in the subway car are staring.

While I wait for the westbound subway, I collect myself. Pull myself together, regroup. And it occurs to me that I should forget Chinatown altogether. I have no idea how to find it. I should go west past Dufferin--past my apartment--and *keep* going west. West is familiar to me. West toward Paraska's shop, *Carpathia Arts*, in Bloor West Village. West toward Paraska herself.

To hell with her test. These *pysanky* are a partnership. Fifty-fifty. Paraska needs them as badly as I do. I think that I will tell her this. We're in it together, we're a team. I'll remind her that my problems are her problems. In fact--no. Eggs are entirely, absolutely, one hundred percent *her* concern. Not mine. She screwed up. Not me. If Paraska had done her job properly, I wouldn't be wasting my time criss-crossing the city.

By the time I reach Paraska's store, I'm angry. There are dozens of cafés and restaurants on both sides of the street. In the air, traces of garlic and grease, freshly-brewed coffee. The smell of baked fish, baked bread. Onions sautéed in butter. When was the last time I ate in a restaurant? When was the last time I could *afford* to eat in a restaurant? I should be making *pysanky*--making money--not wasting my time on an egg-hunt. My stomach growls as I storm through the doors of *Carpathia Arts*. I've had no lunch, eaten nothing since breakfast--since Paraska's fried eggs.

Paraska is nowhere in sight. I walk quickly through the store--up and down the aisles past the record bins, the bookshelves, the T-shirt racks and the used-costumes section. Finally, I notice a dark-haired man squatting behind the cash register, stocking the shelf behind the front counter with recipe books. So Paraska has hired someone to work in her store. Hired someone other than *me*.

I wait at the counter, my stomach rumbling as I glance down at a half-eaten falafel wrapped in foil. I wait for the man behind the counter to notice me--to feel my presence and my anger.

Where is she? I say, finally, placing my hands squarely on my hips.

As the man turns to face me, he smiles. My eyes widen.

He wears khaki slacks and a white *University of Toronto* sweatshirt. There is a small, rectangular piece of plastic pinned to his left breast--a name tag with words printed in Ukrainian and in English. Гон-Чай, *Hon-Chai*.

He's Chinese.

Where is who? he asks.

I say nothing. Instead, I glare at him--at obviously *un*-Ukrainian him with a job that obviously should not be his. What was Paraska thinking? Traitor. She knows that I needed--that I *need*--a job. She knows that I'm Ukrainian, that Ukrainian customers--the middle-aged women, the old *baba*s--would love *me*. I could talk about Christmas carol albums and blouse-patterns and bread recipes. I could give *pysanky*-advice. What could a *Chinese* person--a Chinese *guy*--possibly know about being Ukrainian?

Where is *who*? Hon-Chai repeats his question.

You know who, I say, still glaring.

I tell Hon-Chai that I work for Paraska. That I make *pysanky*--Ukrainian Easter eggs, that is--because Paraska couldn't afford to hire me as a cashier. Too broke to hire me, I say. Not too broke to hire *you*, obviously. I tell Hon-Chai my name, then, pausing to spell it out for him; to explain that it's a *Ukrainian* name because I'm a *Ukrainian* woman. I tell him that I have a brand new middle name, too. Just got it. Sucker. Colleen-the-*Sucker*-Lutzak.

Once or twice, Hon-Chai tries to interrupt me. He shakes his head periodically. But words are pouring from my mouth, now--slowly and quietly, at first; then louder and faster. Angry words. I tell him that Paraska and I had a deal.

She provides the raw materials, I make the *pysanky*. Get it? A partnership, teamwork. Fifty-fifty. Only she hasn't kept up her end of the bargain, she's given me crappy --no, not crappy, *clean*--eggs. Clean eggs are useless! Of course, I'm starting to doubt that she even cares what kind of eggs she gave me because while I've been busting my ass trying to make a measly buck or two with the *useless*, clean eggs she's given me--making a *fool* of myself, thinking that I could help her out and that she might actually sell them for me and that I might make a few dollars for myself here and there, enough to eat, basically--business has been bloody well *booming* here, *obviously*, because Paraska is hiring help left, right, and fucking *centre*--doesn't matter what kind of help--while she lounges around, taking the fucking day off without giving a second thought to gullible, naive, *stupid* me struggling with her good-for-nothing eggs that repel the fucking dye!

When Hon-Chai tries to offer me money for new eggs, I throw the bills back in his face. When he tells me that I don't understand, I bark at him that I understand perfectly. I give him a speech about my perfect understanding of the city and the people who live here; about the way that I've suffered.

That's when I finally pause, and when Hon-Chai finally has an opportunity to speak. He is soft-spoken, calm. Apologetic and very sincere. I lose my balance--

physically lose my balance--while he talks; I have to grab hold of the counter to steady myself.

Paraska is his mother. She can't afford to pay him for working at the store. Every cent of profit goes toward his tuition payments to the university, his books. She is in hospital right now, otherwise she would be here and he would be in class. They are giving her a biopsy, doing tests. Would I please take the money? I could use it to buy more eggs, and groceries. His mother would be very upset if she knew that I was in any way suffering.

I didn't know. As I walk away from *Carpathia Arts*, having mumbled a string of apologies to Hon-Chai, I say the words to myself. *I didn't know.* How could I have known? Paraska never told me that she had a son. An adopted son? Maybe. Or a natural son, fathered by a Chinese man. I didn't know.

On my way home, I visit the grocery marts in Little Portugal, the vegetable markets, the corner stores. Places that I should have searched first. Places that I never considered. I start ten or twelve blocks from home, working my way down the street. At my last stop--the convenience store kitty-corner to my apartment--I find what I'm looking for. Real farm eggs in cardboard egg cartons. I've been to the store a dozen times--though not since the incident with the Portuguese woman--but I never noticed the eggs before. Maybe they're new.

Lying on the floor of my apartment, I glance over at the carton of eggs on the kitchen counter. I've had enough. I don't want to think about *pysanky*. I want to plug in the electric *kistka* and let all the beeswax melt away while I curl up next to the coffee table. I want to close my eyes. Dream of normal people, good people. Dream that I am one of them.

I get up for Paraska, for Hon-Chai. For their sake. Because there is a chance that my *pysanky* could help them. Filling the coffee pot with water, I decide to work through the night. Maybe I'm crazy--to think that my *pysanky* could make a difference. But what else can I do? I owe it to them.

The coffee maker drips and hisses. I plug in the *kistka*, slip a hair-thin piece of wire through the tip, to clear out any clogs. The smell of beeswax is warm and sweet.

Warm like a blanket, sweet like home.

***

The smell.

Monday night, late--Tuesday morning, actually--and it's here, already. In my cubie, in the air. In my nostrils.

In my head, I know. But I can't get rid of it.

For three months we've been volunteering at the hospital--Rosa and Marco, a guy from Brazil, and me. Not the Ralegh Fitkin Hospital in Malkerns, where well-to-do Swazis go when they get sick; not the private clinic near Manzini, for diplomats and Waterford students and foreigners in general, those who can afford a private bed and a European doctor. We volunteer at the Government Hospital in Mbabane, on the Children's Ward--once a week, every Tuesday morning. Twelve Tuesdays in total, so far. I should be used to the place, the patients. The smell. I should be at home with all of it.

The other girls have long since gone to sleep; the hostel is perfectly silent--miraculously silent. I should be tucked into bed, too. I want to go to bed. I want to crawl in between the sheets, close my eyes. I'm tired--it isn't that I'm not tired. It's the smell. The smell comes earlier and earlier every week. At first, it woke me up; now, it keeps me up.

Rosa, I know, doesn't notice the smell. She's been asleep for hours, dreaming about embryos, I suppose, her eyes darting from side to side beneath their freckled lids. Twice I've brought my sleeping bag and pillow to her room, thinking that maybe I would make a bed for myself on her floor. Thinking that I would drift off--peacefully--taking in traces of Rosa's oil paint, Rosa's *Nivea* cream. *Anais Anais*. Rosa's perfume. Twice, though, my plan has failed. Twice the hospital smell followed me.

In my cubie, I've tried cigarettes--three in a row, chain-smoked--and squirts of my own perfume, *Sung*, behind my ears, on my wrists. On the bookshelf over my bed, I've lit a scented candle. Apple blossoms and cinnamon sticks.

And hospital smell.

I could have chosen another Community Service. Nobody forced me to sign up for the hospital. A lot of senior girls are Pre-School Playleaders, tending to staff members' toddlers--two- and three- and four-year olds who smell of baby powder, *Johnson-and-Johnson* baby shampoo. Or a tutor. I could have been a tutor--on the Adult Literacy Team, the Quedusizi Primary School Team. The tutors work with blackboards, chalk. Pens, pencils--the rubbery smell of pink erasers on fresh, clean, white paper. I'm a decent swimmer, I could have joined the Hot Springs Group. I could be dipping schoolaged, water-winged kids in the Hot Springs, in the Ezulwini Valley, every Tuesday morning. I could be bathing in chlorine. Breathing in chlorine.

I chose the Government Hospital because of Rosa. Because Rosa's been volunteering there, at the Children's Ward, for years--before she *had* to, even; before volunteer work was compulsory. She said that it was the most effortless Community Service project--the most effortless, and the most rewarding. Just show up, she said. That's all you have to do. You'll really make a difference there, she said. Bring your guitar.

Rosa didn't mention the smell.

She described to me the sort of Third-World, *Developing* World hospital that I've seen on *World Vision* commercials, on hour-long *Christian Children's Fund* programs. On *Foster Parents' Plan* fundraising telethons. A place bustling with white men and white women in khaki cotton slacks, white cotton shirts--white doctors, nurses, volunteers, all bottle-feeding malnourished infants, spoon-feeding children with spindly legs and distended stomachs. Bringing them all back to life. Doling out vaccinations and advice about breast milk. Rosa mentioned cement floors, cracking plaster on cement walls--a run-down building, all in all, but clean, more or less. Nothing about the smell.

No. Not the smell. Not the smell, the *reek*.

The reek of shit. The reek of piss. The metallic--the iron--reek of afterbirth blood and menstrual blood. Because the toilets on the Children's Ward--which is, in fact, just a three-room sub-ward of the Maternity Wing--only sometimes flush, and diapers are hardly ever changed, and if there are showers or bath tubs, I've never seen them and I fear that they're rarely ever used. The sweet rotting reek of open, festering bedsores--of bed sheets rarely washed, caked in dried blood, sweat, pus. The rancid reek of oil from the fried fish--the whole fried fish, complete with heads and tails and fins--that the children never finish at lunch but rather save--in swatches of greasy toilet paper--to eat later. The reek of charred human flesh, too--of children rushed in with bone-deep burns from their mothers' open cooking flames; children who have no skin left for grafting and who die on the floor, in the hallway, their bodies still feeling the fire.

I fall asleep with the smell. Sometime before the sun rises.

When I open my eyes, Rosa is standing over me. Oblivious to the hospital smell still strong in my cubie, she is smiling--telling me that I let my candle burn down in the night, that a pool of hot wax has collected and cooled on my bookshelf. We'll have to clean it later, she says, as we don't want to be late for the hospital. In her hands, Rosa holds a skirt--her navy-blue pleated skirt. The skirt I borrow every week for Community Service. To enter all government buildings in Swaziland--hospital included--all girls have to wear skirts. Flowing, conservative, below-the-knee skirts. My one, rather snug, denim mini doesn't count.

I think it isn't fair. That we have to wear skirts. Marco doesn't have to wear a skirt. It isn't fair that Marco can bring his football, either--his *soccer* football, that is--and bounce it non-stop in the bus on the way to Mbabane and grin from ear to ear the whole time. Marco is in love with the sport; he signed up for Community Service at the hospital so that he could play it every Tuesday morning--so that he could take the healthiest children from the ward and play football with them for four full hours. It isn't fair. That he leaves Rosa and me with the sickest and the feeblest.

Of course, Rosa never grumbles about Marco--never complains about the bouncing of his football or the fact that he can, and that he does, wear jogging shorts to the hospital each week. She likes him is the problem. She thinks that the scars on his knee from a football injury--and from five subsequent surgeries on the injury--are sexy. And his accent. Rosa is crazy about his accent. When Marco greets her in Spanish--*eh, gringita, como es tas?*--she giggles and her face turns blotchy-red.

I think that Marco's knee is about the ugliest, lumpiest criss-crossed mess of scars I've ever seen. Looking at it makes me nauseous. Plus he's a dope-smoker. All of his friends are dope-smokers. How can he be serious about football when all he does is smoke dope? He probably injured his knee because he was playing football after smoking dope. When he opens his mouth, he sounds to me like *Cheech and Chong*.

Forty of us--forty senior students--ride the Community Service bus together on Tuesday mornings. Members of the Quedusizi Primary School Team and the Adult Literacy Team take textbooks with them, and notepads and flash cards covered in mathematical equations--addition and subtraction, mostly; some simple multiplication. They run through their lesson plans on the bus. The Hot Springs Group brings bags stuffed with bathing costumes, towels. Swimming caps and goggles. Inflatable water toys shaped like ducks, dinosaurs, frogs, fish, sea horses, turtles.

On her lap, Rosa carries a cardboard box filled with art supplies--her own finger paints, wax crayons, oil pastels and pencil crayons plus construction paper from the

Community Service supply room at the college. Marco's got the inevitable football. My guitar is at my feet.

While I cross my fingers--say a silent prayer that the bus will break down--Rosa chatters to Marco about yesterday's football match: WK senior boys versus who? Some senior boys from a high school in Manzini, I think. Rosa and I were only at the match for ten, maybe fifteen minutes. The rest of the afternoon we spent in the art room, experimenting with batik fabric dyes on raw eggs.

Rosa praises Marco for his outstanding performance in the first half of the game. His outstanding footwork and his outstanding head bunt and his outstanding goal in the last seconds of the game. She is nervous, I know. I can tell. Trying too hard, repeating herself--repeating things that she's heard other students say about the football match.

Marco tells Rosa that, actually, the senior boys lost and that maybe she's mistaken him for someone else? Because, actually, he never scored. His knee was acting up. During the last half of the game, he didn't so much as set foot on the playing field.

Rosa's face blotches instantly; it looks, in fact, something like the eggs we tried--unsuccessfully--to dye in the art room. I have to help her.

What she means, I say, cheerfully, is that you *should* have scored the winning goal of the match. Right, Rosa? And if you *had* scored the winning goal, it would have been an *outstanding* goal.

Rosa is quiet for the rest of the trip.

As the bus pulls up to the front doors of the hospital, though, Rosa brightens. I take a deep breath of fresh air--my last, I know, for the next four hours. Rosa and Marco walk quickly up the ramp that leads through the hospital--past the surgical theatres, past the geriatric wing--to Ward Eight. The Children's Ward. I lag behind, linger at the doorway of the playroom--where the children also take all their meals, where some of them sleep at night. The smell here is worse than in any other part of the hospital; it makes me dizzy. I have to lean on a wall to steady myself.

Six or seven little boys run to Marco--all under the age of seven and healthy, for the most part. Almost ready to go home. Some are in hospital with fractured wrists, broken arms; some are recovering from burns to their faces and chests. One boy grabs the football from Marco's hands, the others race down the ramp to the doors of the hospital, Marco follows. I hear their giggles in the distance as they move toward the empty lot beside the hospital, as they move away from the playroom.

There are healthy girls here, too--at least three of them, between ten and twelve years of age. They are healthier even than the little boys who play football with Marco. In fact, the healthy girls are only here because their siblings are ill. Their mothers send them to the hospital to watch over their sick infant sisters and brothers. The healthy girls never play football, never join in Rosa's arts and crafts. They hardly smile.

The other children, though--the children who are really ill, terminally ill, and abandoned, some of them, and alone, and never ever going home--they smile. When they see Rosa, they smile so hard that I think they might hurt themselves.

Rosa has trouble, sometimes, setting her box of art supplies onto the table in the playroom. The children hug her arms and legs--cling to any part of Rosa they can grab hold of--refusing to let go. I have to step in, taking the box from her, freeing her limbs.

Rosa makes sure to greet all of the children. Kneeling down to them, one by one, she folds them into her arms, kisses their cheeks. Some are too frail to be embraced, so she strokes their faces, gently, and their hair. They like to touch her face, too--her hair, especially. She lets them.

Over the last five years, Rosa has formed a bond with several of the children on Ward Eight--the permanent residents, the children who are stuck here until they turn eighteen. Or until they die.

Mbuso is not supposed to have lived this long--sixteen years. His face looks to be about ten, maybe eleven years old--his body, even younger--but he is sixteen. He wears a hooped earring in his right ear, shaves his head like a Mohawk. Mbuso is paralyzed from the waist--possibly the chest--down, and gets around by dragging himself with his arms and hands. There is no money for a wheelchair for Mbuso--or a catheter or a colostemy bag. Around his waist and down, around his legs, he wraps raggy strips of bed sheets, for a diaper. I think that he probably washes the rags himself.

Rosa knows a lot about spina bifida. From her parents, I suppose. It starts, she says, in the womb, shortly after fertilization. Two or three weeks into the development of Mbuso, something went wrong, and his tiny neural tube--which, in normal embryos, becomes the spinal cord and the brain--didn't close properly. Rosa says that underneath Mbuso's clothes--underneath his diaper-sheet--there is an open lesion. A hole in his back, with damaged spinal cord protruding. There is no money for an operation to close it.

The nurses say that no operation will help Dumi, that Dumi will almost certainly die soon. They talk about it all the time--in his presence they talk about it, as though he can't hear them, as though he can't understand. He's new to the ward, actually--has only been in the hospital for two weeks, lying on a cot in the corner of the playroom, his burnt body swathed in gauze. He is ten years old and fully conscious, he whispers into Rosa's ear when she bends down to him. The nurses feed him every two or three hours with a bottle, like a baby.

On occasion, the nurses let Gugu feed Dumi--to teach her about child-care. Gugu is a big girl--seventeen, tall, big-boned, and full of energy--born with Down's Syndrome. She also helps the nurses sweep, tidy the playroom, put the babies down for naps. Gugu has spent her life in Ward Eight--was delivered here, I think, then left by her mother. In a years time, Gugu will have to go. They will sterilize her first. Where? I wonder. Where will she go?

To a government asylum, maybe, in another part of Swaziland. Sipho, nearly fifteen, is destined, soon, for such a place because the nurses at the Government Hospital aren't trained to deal with him, don't know how to begin helping him. When Sipho was very small--a baby, they think--his mother went away, or died, more likely, leaving her husband to care for the boy. The husband, though--the father--knew nothing about babies; when he left for work on the mines in South Africa, he left Sipho for weeks on end locked in a sort of back room--a closet, really--in a shack in rural Swaziland, with hardly enough food or water to survive. A relative found Sipho seven years ago.

This is the story, at least--the story I heard from Rosa, who heard it in SiSwati from the nurses. There are plenty of holes in it, if you ask me. Something got lost in the translation, I'm sure. Or else the nurses stole the plot from some Gothic novel they once read.

Sipho *is* like an animal. Sometimes he is violent, kicking or slapping the other children, and he is frequently--very frequently--caught touching his genitals, playing with his stool. He can't walk. When the nurses untie the rags that bind him to the playroom table, he moves around on all fours, grunting, snarling. Supposedly, he can't talk. But we've all heard Sipho utter swear words--clear as day--and not in SiSwati, either. In *English*. Nobody in rural Swaziland speaks English. The nurses on Ward Eight all speak SiSwati. Rosa speaks SiSwati. Even Marco fumbles around in SiSwati. Where does a Swazi wild boy learn English swear words like *asshole* and *bloody hell* and *cock* and *fuck*?

Precious is terrified of Sipho--terrified of his guttural grunts and snarls. Really, any loud noise spooks her, drives her under a blanket in the corner of the playroom. So long as the ward is quiet, though, Precious is fine--relaxed, playful. Looking at her, in fact, she seems a completely normal thirteen year old. As normal as any child her age. Except for her fear of loud noises. And the long, white line across her neck. According to the nurses--again, the nurses--Precious was raised by a grandmother who yelled at the girl constantly. After the yelling came the beating. And then, to further discipline the child, the grandmother tied her to a wall. By the neck. With copper wire.

I am suspicious of the nurses. They look chronically bored, listless. When they do anything--wash a face, fold a towel, even walk--it's with a certain heaviness, a general lack of interest. The nurses at the hospital are badly paid, I'm sure. But sometimes I wonder if they have had a hand in scarring the children--if they untie Sipho only when we are present, watching them; if they really care to teach Gugu a few basic life skills, or if they enjoy seeing Gugu do their work; if they haven't themselves resorted to yelling and to copper wire, on occasion. Sometimes I think that better pay wouldn't make any difference at all.

I've never seen a doctor in the Children's Ward.

There is, though, on Ward Eight--I've learned, I've seen with own eyes--a kind of social order among the children, a set of social rules--unwritten, of course, but understood by all. The healthier children belong at the bottom of the pecking order; the sicker the child, the higher the status. Mbuso, the boy with spina bifida, is at the top; he is the enforcer--the ring-leader of the ward, policing the healthy and protecting the weak. No one is to tease Precious, no one is to intentionally frighten her with a raised voice. No one is ever to point to or laugh at Sipho, regardless of what he might say or do. No harm must come to Dumi--his cot is sacred--no balls can be thrown his way, no toys tossed in his direction. Gugu is to be treated like a woman, with respect.

I've also learned that Mbuso has a crush on Rosa. I've seen it, too, with my own eyes--the way he stares at her as she lays out her art supplies on the table and on the floor in the playroom; the way he watches her as she helps the other children draw or paint, guiding their hands across the paper, praising their work. He looks with such adoration--such longing for her, such craving. As though he could at any moment break down and cry for her.

Mbuso loves Rosa, without a doubt. And he hates Ayanda--would bash the baby's head against the cement, I think, if he could. If he had the strength.

Ayanda is a baby, three or four months old, and new to the ward. A month ago--according to the nurses--he was brought in by a taxi driver who found him in his car. Ayanda--the nurses gave him this name--is not likely to last on Ward Eight, though. The nurses know this, Mbuso knows this. I know this. He's an infant and he is perfectly healthy and it is only a matter of time before somebody adopts him.

Rosa won't hear of it. Today, for the fourth week in a row, she carries Ayanda in her arms--refuses to put him down--for the full four hours of Community Service. While she directs the other children's art lesson, she bounces Ayanda, rocks Ayanda, talks baby-talk to Ayanda. Holds the bottle to his lips, sings him lullabies.

Meanwhile, of course, *my* job--my role--is to sing to all of the other Ward Eight children. I'm supposed to use my talent for their benefit, fill their hearts with music. Uplift them with song.

I try. No one can say that I don't try. I try to brighten their lives with my guitar, my voice--like Rosa with her crayons and her paper. I lug the guitar with me every Tuesday, drag it out of its case each week. For four hours, on a chair in the corner of the playroom--the kind of miniature chair meant for a child's body--I sit strumming chords absent-mindedly, singing along now and again. *Row Row Row Your Boat, My Bonnie, Twinkle Twinkle*. Sometimes I sing pop songs, rock 'n' roll. Once I tried singing in Ukrainian--lively, up-tempo songs like *Oi chorna ia sy chorna* and *Chervona rozha*. But I am in the background here, I am the background noise.

When I first started coming to this hospital, some of the children who have always lived on the ward--Mbuso, Precious, even Gugu--flocked to my side, asking for Steve.

They all asked, Where is Steve?--in SiSwati, of course, with the nurses translating so that I could understand.

When is Steve coming? Today? Will Steve be here today? Will Steve come tomorrow?

Steve, apparently, was a Waterford student--on scholarship from the US--who used to volunteer on Ward Eight. Before Rosa started coming to the hospital. Which would make it six, seven years ago. He must have made quite an impression, this Steve, because the children--and even some of the nurses--remember him, after all these years. They miss him--are still waiting for his return, hoping that one Tuesday morning he will stroll with me though the playroom doors. In my voice--in my accent, I suppose--they hear Steve.

But the children aren't stupid. After the first few weeks of asking for Steve, they figured out that I'm not going to bring him back. Not ever. I think they blame me for it, too. As though I am keeping Steve from them, taking his place. As though if I were to stay away, there would be room again for Steve.

There are those children, of course, who never knew Steve. They know Rosa, though, and they know that I'm not her. That I'm nothing at all like her. They know that they can't talk to me because I don't speak SiSwati. They know that they can't touch me because there is a guitar between us--a barrier, a wall--and because I keep it there, on purpose, to hide behind. Sometimes, when I have just opened the case or when I am about to close it, one or two of the children will reach out, brushing their fingers against the guitar strings.

Mostly, they take no notice of me. They look past me, walk around me, like they would a bed or a table or a chair. And I let them.

At a quarter to twelve, Rosa and I start to watch the clock. My spirits lift, hers plummet. Less than fifteen minutes to go, I think. Less than fifteen minutes more before the bus comes to take us away. Only fifteen more minutes, she thinks--I can see her brow furrow as she kisses Ayanda's forehead. Only fifteen minutes more. Maybe I can stretch it, make the bus wait. Maybe the bus will be late today.

At ten minutes to twelve, Marco returns to the ward with his entourage of panting, perspiring little boys. I am half an hour now from a hot shower, a fresh towel. Thirty minutes from the clean smells of soap and shampoo, conditioner and hand lotion.

At three minutes to twelve, the *Ladies of Mercy* start to arrive, and our time is up for the week.

The *Ladies of Mercy*, I know, sound vaguely like a gaggle of nuns. They're not. Their founding mother may well have been Catholic but all present members are British--*English*-British, that is. Church of England, I assume, though they rarely talk about religion. They talk, instead, about their children, who board at private schools in England, and their husbands, who are--any day now--expecting re-appointments to London. All of their husbands work, I assume, for the British High Commissioner--that or they run the Club in Mbabane. Because the *Ladies of Mercy*--Charlotte, Mae, Lenora, and Blanche--are always chatting about tea at the Consulate or tea at the Club. As near as I can tell, their primary objective is to make tea parties for the children of Ward Eight every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon. I half-expect them one day to turn up in flouncy hats and short, white gloves.

They mean well, of course--Rosa is always reminding me that they mean well. They bring second-hand toys for the children, and second-hand books. Second-hand clothing, blankets, towels. More like third-hand, I think, or fourth-hand. More like scraps that their servants have thrown away.

Today, the *Ladies of Mercy* bring with them a new woman--a new face so much unlike those of the other *Ladies of Mercy* that Rosa, Marco, and I stop in the doorway of the playroom. Stop and stare.

She is sinewy and lean, taller than the regular *Ladies of Mercy*--or *seems* taller, as her hair has been teased and lifted into a great copper ball on the top of her head. Her skin is tanned copper--her arms, ankles, neck--everything, copper. She wears black, slip-on, backless sandals with four-inch spiked heels and a form-fitting backless and sleeveless halter-top that ties around her neck. There is a leopard-spotted scarf around her neck, too, that perfectly matches her leopard-spotted jeans which are, I would say, three-sizes too small.

Trousers. *Jeans*. In a government building.

Next to the copper woman, the regular ladies--Charlotte, Mae, Lenora, Blanche--look smaller and plainer and paler than ever in their cotton print blouses, their brown cotton skirts, their flat-soled, practical shoes.

One of the *Ladies of Mercy*, Blanche, clears her throat as she introduces the new woman.

This is *Bernadette*, says Blanche, with a cough. Bernadette is one of our *German* friends.

As she struts around the playroom, surveying the children, Bernadette ignores Rosa, Marco, me, Blanche, and the other *Ladies of Mercy*. All of us.

Bernadette, says Blanche, is going to be taking little Ayanda.

Bernard! says Bernadette, lifting Ayanda from the arms of the nurse who is holding him.

Rosa's face blotches, I feel her body stiffen next to mine.

What do you mean *taking* Ayanda? says Rosa, addressing the *Ladies of Mercy*, I think, but glaring straight at Bernadette.

Taking him to *Germany*, Blanche says, as soon as he is healthy enough to travel. Bernadette is *adopting* him. Isn't that lovely? Good for little Ayand--er--Bernard. Good for him! Good for all of Ward Eight! Think how all the children will benefit from Bernadette's generous contribution to the Children's Ward--

One of the other *Ladies of Mercy* shoots Blanche a dirty look and Blanche suddenly stops talking.

Marco declares that we have to be going, that the bus is waiting for us by the front doors.

His name is *Ayanda*! says Rosa, raising her voice to the *Ladies of Mercy*, Bernadette, whoever will listen.

I touch Rosa's arm, whispering that we have to leave now. She shakes my hand away, then starts to move toward Bernadette.

Ayanda, Rosa says. Not Bernard. *Ayanda*! And he doesn't *want* to go to Germany--he wants to stay in Swaziland. Swaziland is his *home*. He can't talk yet but if he could, oh, if he could, he'd tell you himself. He'd tell you that he wants to stay *here* and, and--

Bernadette turns her back to Rosa.

Mae says, Oh dear.

Rosa tries to pull Ayanda from Bernadette's arms. Bernadette--who seems vaguely bored by Rosa--pulls Ayanda back, lifting the baby high over her head, out of Rosa's reach.

Charlotte says, Oh *heavens*.

Ayanda starts to cry. In the corner, Mbuso, I see, is smiling.

See? says Rosa, nearly crying herself. Ayanda doesn't want you. He doesn't need *you*. You have no right to take him! You can't just buy children, you have no right! There are *laws*.

Then the tone of Rosa's voice changes.

Come, sweetheart, she says. Come, it's all right. I'll take you, now, my darling.

Beneath Bernadette, Rosa stands wiggling her fingers, her arms outstretched to take the baby. Bernadette--entirely unaffected by Rosa--walks to the other side of the playroom, bouncing Ayanda in her arms, talking to him in German. The only word I can understand is "Bernard." She says it again and again.

Crying, now, and yelling--yelling terrible things about Krauts and Nazis--Rosa follows Bernadette around the playroom. Bernadette keeps moving, spitting the odd

German phrase over her shoulder at Rosa. There are more *Oh dears* and *Oh heavens* from the *Ladies of Mercy* who wring their heads, look at each other helplessly.

Marco leans--annoyed--against the door frame of the playroom, his arms crossed over his chest. The nurses busy themselves with folding diapers, putting toys away in the cupboard. All of the other children stand and stare.

I am the one, finally, to half-carry, half-drag Rosa out of the ward, comforting her as we go. Marco walks ahead of us by at least ten steps, which infuriates me. I could use his help. I *need* his help. Rosa is the same size as me and fighting desperately--hanging on to railings, digging in her heels.

Through her sobs, Rosa tries to speak, tries to stop me from taking her away. She says a half dozen sad, crazy things--things like *my baby, my little one. My sweetheart, I'll take you home. I'll take you.* But we have to go--Ayanda has to go--and she knows it.

As we approach the bus, Rosa changes tactics, tries pleading. When the pleading doesn't work, she lists things that she has forgotten in th[illegible] *I forgot my pencil crayons, I forgot my pastels, I forgot my purse.* But Marco is carrying her box of art supplies and Rosa doesn't own a purse.

She lashes out at me, then. *Let go of me, you bitch! You fucking bitch, let go!*

I forgive her for this before she's even said it. I remind her that the bus is full of people, that everyone can see her. That *Marco* can see her. What I want to tell her--what I will tell her later, and what she will come to accept because she has no choice but to accept it--is that Ayanda is lucky to have a future, now. A future filled with good food to eat and a regular home and nice clothes.

With the mention of Marco, Rosa's crying peters our and she starts hiccuping. On the ride back to the school, she says nothing. Not a word. When we arrive back at the college, she heads straight for Sick Bay, electing to spend the rest of the day there.

After supper, as the sun sets, I go to the infirmary with Oreo cookies for Rosa. Rosa loves Oreos. She is sitting up on a bed with her back against the wall, her knees to her chest. I sit beside her on the cot. Her eyes are bloodshot, her nose red, her freckled lids puffed up from crying. The place smells of ammonia and lemon soap.

That horrible woman, she says, looking out the window, not touching the cookies.

Tears well up in her eyes.

If it was anybody but her--she says, not finishing her sentence.

I hand her a tissue.

I could have adopted him, says Rosa, pressing the tissue to her eyes.

I look away, toward the empty bed next to us.

I *could* have, she says.

I nod, though I know--we both know--that she is wrong.

Then, like a very small child, Rosa curls herself up with her head on my lap. And, like this, she cries, wetting my jeans with her tears.

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The shivering wakes me, the chattering sound of my own teeth. The wetness on my upper lip. Fully clothed, covered in a sheet, then a quilt, then an afghan, I'm curled up on the floor in front of the coffee table. With the blankets wrapped around me like a shroud, I get up to adjust the thermostat. With the edge of the afghan, I wipe my nose.

The coffee table is spread with newspaper, the margins of which are filled with doodles, designs that I've practiced over and over again. On the newspaper are crumpled sheets of paper towel, creased dishcloths, wads of Kleenex--all dye-stained, some dotted with hot wax that has cooled into black clumps. A pack of Du Maurier lies open next to an empty can of Coke, a makeshift ashtray. The dye jars are open, too; teaspoons left inside them, leaning against the glass. There is an open jar of peanut butter; a butter knife; a dinner plate covered in crumbs; a half-eaten loaf of bread. And three coffee cups with dark, dried rings of coffee at the bottom of each. As though three of us have been making *pysanky*.

But there is only one--one *pysanka*-maker, one *pysanka*. The *pysanka* is nearly finished. It's a deep wine color criss-crossed by a web of beeswax lines. I worked through the night on the egg: on white, yellow, orange, red. Horizontal white bands filled with yellow rams' horns, orange deer antlers, red wolves' teeth. A Hutsul design, in dark, lusty Hutsul colours--meant to capture something of fall in Ukraine; the autumn sun setting over the Carpathians; the rage of an Arkan bonfire at dusk.

And I'm freezing. Something has happened overnight in my apartment, something to do with my heater. The metal on my heating vents is cold to the touch, ice has formed on the inside of my windows, along the sills. On the surface of each dye on the coffee table there is a thin skin of frozen liquid. It occurs to me that my raw eggs--my *pysanky*--might also be frozen. What happens to an egg when it freezes, when it's thawed? Probably it cracks, slowly, like ice on a river in spring; or it weeps. Maybe it just weeps.

I plug in the electric *kistka*, then, and, while I wait for the wax to warm, I go to the phone. Two days until Christmas. Outside, through the window, I watch the snow falling in wet, grey flakes. With my fingers crossed that my landlady is at home--that she can find a repairman to fix the heater--I pick up the receiver. No dial tone. With the receiver still in my hand, I flick the light switch beside the telephone in the kitchen. No lights. With the receiver dangling, now, on its cord, I run back to the electric *kistka*. Cold.

My hands tremble as I throw on a sweater, rewrap myself in the blankets. The City of Toronto, the people who work there--they can't do this, surely, in the middle of winter, at the coldest time of the year? I only missed one payment, possibly two. They would give advance notice, definitely; advance warning. Wouldn't they? People could die in temperatures like this. At below-freezing temperatures, people do. Die, I mean.

With my heart pounding in my chest, blood pumping in my ears, I move quickly. I have to if I want to keep warm, and if I want to finish my Hutsul *pysanka*. The sooner I finish my Hutsul *pysanka*, the sooner I can run it--and my first *pysanka*--to *Carpathia Arts*. Fifty dollars should do for the time being, should cover my heating bill. Heat is all I really need. I can keep making *pysanky* by candlelight until I've made enough money for the electricity and the phone bills. Easy. For a gimmick, Paraska--or Hon-Chai--can advertise that my *pysanky* are made the old fashioned way, like in the Old Country, with a copper-wire *kistka* and a candle's open flame.

It's better this way, I think, as I warm the old fashioned *kistka*, as I watch the flames lick at the tiny, copper funnel. It's more *real* this way, more authentic. My left hand is icy around the egg, though, and I feel my whole body shiver with cold. Pulling the blankets tight around my shoulders, I *will* my right hand to stop moving, to stop shaking. I must have straight lines.

But it comes back to me, then, as the *kistka* scratches at the surface of the egg, leaving no lines, no trace of beeswax. It comes back to me. I remember what happens when an egg is chilled. A refrigerated egg repels beeswax; like a chemically-washed egg repels dye. A cold egg is useless.

With a deep breath--a deep, hopeless breath--I drop my head down, and I sob. Deep, hopeless sobs. For there is no real hope for me now, no hope for my *pysanka*. Without heat, no *pysanky*. Without *pysanky*, no heat.

How long do I cry like this, with my head down over the coffee table, over the candle? Long enough for my face to get warm, warmer; hot. I think, for a split second, that the heat has returned, miraculously, to my apartment. Then the smell reaches my nostrils--a singed-chicken smell, a charred-flesh smell. The smell of the fringe of hair across my forehead burning.

The *smell*.

I can't stomach it. Before I throw up, I slip on my shoes, blow out the candle. There isn't time, even, to check myself--check the damage--in the mirror. I need fresh air *now*. As I pace up and down the street in front of my apartment, I realize that I've still got my Hutsul *pysanka* in my hand, that I'm still wrapped in blankets--sheet, quilt, afghan. One edge of the bedsheet drags along the ground as I walk, making lines in the snow. Like a tail, or a wing.

Warnings were sent. I find a handful of them stuffed into my mailbox beside supermarket flyers and two-for-one pizza offers; beside free Mr. Lube oil-change coupons, Heart and Lung Association circulars, Columbia House record deals. *Final Notice. Please remit to above address. Pay by, Settle account before, Outstanding balance is.* There have been warnings, I just didn't look for them.

There is a package, too. A thin manila envelope, folded into two, lengthwise, to fit into my mailbox. On the upper right hand corner, seven identical King Mswati's smile at me from the surface of seven identical Swazi postage stamps. The ink of a postmark--*October 27, Mbabane, Swaziland*--is smeared across two Mswati faces like war paint, like a botched tattoo.

I drop to the ground, setting my *pysanka* down in my lap as I examine the package. Its contents are poking through the mashed, mangled corners of the envelope. Packages from home always arrived like this in Swaziland: tattered, torn, dotted with greasy fingerprints. Late. Six or seven packages from home were mistakenly routed to Switzerland or Surinam before they arrived at the college. They were ransacked, sometimes; robbed of the chocolates they carried--the Carleton cards, the Kodak film--and then resealed with packing tape.

Of course, no one at the Swazi Postal Services has stolen from this envelope--there's nothing in it to steal. Nothing good, at least. A short typewritten letter from Mrs. McLachlan; a copy of the college newsbulletin, *The Phoenix*. Mrs. McLachlan is requesting information with respect to my present state of affairs, my ongoing achievements since I graduated from Waterford. It's nothing personal--a form letter.

Dear Alumnus. She needs material for the forthcoming issue of *The Phoenix*, for the "Who's Where" component of the newsletter.

I flip straight to the back pages of the newsletter before me, to the "Who's Where" section of this *Phoenix*. There are four pages, in fact, of ex-students' names--all organized alphabetically--with miniature biographies attached to them, none longer than one or two lines. *Michael Davidson, presently practicing international law with London firm Taylor Joynson Garrett. Sarah DeBeer, currently completing graduate studies in Economics at Wits. Muzi Dlamini, recenty relocated to Pretoria with wife Vusile.* Most of the names are foreign to me--most of the students who are listed here graduated from Waterford long before I arrived. Some, though, I recognize.

> *Nikola Franke, working as United Nations volunteer in Bosnia.*
> *Katja Malanowski, Rhodes Scholar, Oxford.*
> *Shelagh Murphy, teaching English as a second language in Thailand.*

My name would appear somewhere between *Franke* and *Malanowski*, I suppose.

> *Colleen Lutzak, currently unemployed in Toronto, she keeps busy by making Easter eggs and, most recently, by setting fire to her hair.*

For a moment before I close the newsletter altogether, I run my finger down along the "Who's Where" list to the names that start with *R*. *R* for *Reed, Reyels, Reynold*. *R* for *Richardson, Rodriquez, Rosenthal, Ruddock*. I find one *Russell*. *Russell, Arnold*. Of course. The Russell I know--knew--wouldn't answer my letters, why would she answer Mrs. McLachlan's?

I stare, then, at the drawing on the cover of the newsletter. A student's sketch, obviously, in black and white, of a large creature--half-hawk, half-angel--engulfed in fire.

stretching its enormous wings upward to defy the flames. It's a good sketch, I think; it has imagination. Though the Russell I knew, Rosa, would probably disagree.

With *The Phoenix* tucked under my blankets, I start to walk--walk where? Just walk. Around the block once, twice, to clear my head. Then down the street to a pay phone. I can call collect, wait in the shelter of the phone booth while a friendly pre-recorded voice connects me to Mom and Dad. *You have a collect call from--Kalyna.* Mom or Dad--whoever answers the phone--will immediately recognize from the chill in my voice that I'm in trouble, and they'll save me. Dad will wire me money or--better still--arrange for my plane ticket home. He'll wait for me in the airport in Edmonton. I'll be home in time for Christmas.

I feel *The Phoenix* rustle as I walk. Yes. Rosa would find flaws in the student's drawing--real talons don't curl like that; put those wings on a real bird and he'd topple over in an instant, never take flight. Rosa would redraw the phoenix--redraw it her own way. Transform it into a fetus with tight wings wrapped around its body to protect it from the flames; transform the flames into a fiery womb. She would redraw and redraw the phoenix until there was no fire around it at all, just glowing red coals; until it wasn't a phoenix anymore but an incubating baby chick. Until it wasn't even a baby chick but an embryo--a toasty warm embryo, but an embryo nonetheless.

An embryo like all the rest.

***

Twenty-nine degrees Celsuis, seven o'clock in the morning, the end of November, and the senior hostel has no air conditioning. No building on campus, in fact, has air conditioning. I sleep naked--no sleeping bag, no blanket. Not even a top sheet to cover me. When I wake up, the bed sheets beneath me are damp, my pillow case is damp. My hair is wet with sweat, matted. By midday, the temperature approaches forty degrees. I wear thin shorts and thin T-shirts to class--no shirt at all during study period in my cubie. I've never been so hot.

Someday, I think--some November--when I'm back in Canada, back in Alberta, I'll miss the warm weather. I'll tell stories about it. *Twenty-nine degrees* above *zero*, I'll say, *during the coolest part of the day. Imagine! November and no snow, no sleet, no ice.*

No rain, either. No relief from the heat. Summer in Swaziland--the rainy season--officially started two months ago, only we haven't had any rain yet and the college water reservoir is at its lowest level in fifteen years. The college pool has been drained; the gates to the swimming area have been closed and padlocked. Toilets flush every second day, water trickles out of taps. Once a week, students are permitted a shower--one shower per student per week. Swazi officials are calling it a drought, college officials are rationing water.

We're supposed to feel fortunate that we can shower once a week, that we have water for sponge baths every other day of the week, that we have water to drink whenever we like. Several schools in Mbabane and Manzini have shut down--closed their doors indefinitely--because of the water shortage. Dozens of people from rural Swaziland are going to hospital, sick from the heat, sick from drinking bad water. But our sick bay is busy, too, with students stricken by heat exhaustion, dehydration--students with fair skin and fair hair, for the most part. Like Rosa. Since the heat wave started, Rosa's been to the infirmary three times with sun stroke.

Each time Rosa goes to sick bay, I go with her--stay with her as long as I can between classes, at lunch time, before study period. It's Marco's fault, really, that she gets sick. Marco and Rosa are an item, now. Boyfriend and girlfriend. She spends hours on the sidelines of the soccer pitch under the blazing afternoon sun--without a hat, without sunblock--watching him play, cheering him on. Rosa thinks that hats look silly on her. And she wants to be tanned. Tanned for Marco. No hat, for Marco. I think that she's crazy.

She's crazy about Marco, and Marco doesn't seem to notice her on the sidelines, doesn't seem to care much if she's there or not. He spends most of his free time in the boys' hostel with his friends, unless she comes to fetch him for a stroll around the playing field, a cup of coffee in the hostel common room.

Rosa plans her free time around Marco, plans her weekends around Marco, talks about nothing but Marco--*thinks* about nothing but Marco, too, I'm sure. In the last month, she's drawn six embryos, each bearing an unmistakable resemblance to Marco. One is resting on a green field surrounded by perfectly round spheres filled with swirls of black and white--soccer balls, clearly. Another is superimposed on a map of South America with the words *Como es tas?* floating up from its mouth over Brazil. There are two solid brown embryos, each with muscular legs and one knee--his injured knee--wrapped in a maze of vines, green leaves, tiny cherry blossoms. The worst of the lot is her pink, heart-shaped womb bulging with the intertwined arms and legs of two, pink lover-embryos.

On my fourth visit to Rosa in sick bay, during her fourth bout with sun stroke, it occurs to me--for the first time--that her feelings for Marco might be more than a crush, that she might really *love* him. We are three weeks away from the end of term, less than a month away from the six-week Christmas break, and, for the first time in the last three or four months, Rosa doesn't want to discuss our trip--doesn't want to hear about the arrival of her *pysanky*-making supplies, doesn't want to talk about the work we are going to do on our Extended Essays. Nothing. As I chat to her about the coming holiday, she stares out the window of the infirmary. I'm not sure that she's even listening.

Mom is sending dyes, *kistky*, beeswax--everything Rosa will need to make *pysanky* for her Extended Essay. And Mom is sending sheet music, too, for me. Sheet music, cassette recordings of old LP's, Ukrainian songbooks, history books. The package from home is due any day; for weeks, now, Rosa and I have been waiting for it. Rosa's E^2 is an autobiographical exploration of art--of embryo-art, to be specific; *pysanky* will form a large part of her paper. My E^2 is a study of Ukrainian folk music in Canada. I can't so much as start my paper without the materials that Mom is sending.

Rosa and I have planned to work on our E^2's over the Christmas holiday, while we travel. We've got it all worked out--the route we'll follow, the hotels we'll stay in. A week in Durban, first, by the beach, sunbathing, swimming in the Indian Ocean. On Christmas Day, we're going to eat hamburgers and candy floss at the amusement park on the waterfront. After Durban, we're taking another week to sightsee along the coast of the Eastern Cape. Our bus stops in East London, Port Elizabeth, Mosselbaai and then we hop on a train through the Western Cape headed for Cape Town. New Year's Eve we'll spend in Cape Town, plus full two weeks more exploring the Cape Peninsula--Table Mountain, the Cape of Good Hope. Wine tasting tours at vineyards around Stellenbosch and Paarl. From Cape Town, then, we go north and east through the Great Karoo, staying overnight at bed-and-breakfasts in Beaufort West, in Kimberley--visiting the famous diamond mines around Kimberley--and then, finally, Johannesburg. *Jo'burg*. For a few days of shopping before heading back to school.

We're going to take turns carrying my guitar--it will be cumbersome, but it has to come--and Rosa's eggs, in an egg carton lined with soft cloth and tissues. We think that, if we're very careful, the eggs will survive the trip.

Of course now, sitting beside Rosa in the sick bay, I'm beginning to doubt that the trip will even happen. I talk about our first night in Durban--our giant-prawn dinner, complete with champagne and fresh, chocolate-dipped strawberries for dessert--but Rosa says nothing. I talk about the *pysanky* she will make in Port Elizabeth, in Mosselbaai--fish designs inspired by the ocean--and she says nothing. I talk about making bonfires on the beach in Cape Town, staying up late, singing songs with the guitar, sipping white and red and blush wines--nothing. When I pause, wondering if I should suggest altering our plans--changing them to meet Marco, maybe, halfway through the holiday--Rosa turns to face me, smiling. She says that she's been to sick bay three times now and Marco has come to see her every time.

Four times. She's been to sick bay *four* times, not three. And Marco comes to visit Rosa with two or three of his friends, never alone. He pops his head through the door to say a quick hello, then leaves. I change my mind on the spot: over my dead body will we meet Marco during the Christmas holiday. Marco never sits at her bedside, never holds wet facecloths to her forehead, never wipes the vomit from her chin when she's finished throwing up.

I leave Rosa with a glass of orange juice and her sketchbook--leave her to go to my music lesson with Mrs. McLachlan, promising to return to sick bay as soon as I've finished. With the heat, my piano lessons have generally become briefer, more informal, less intense. The music rooms are stifling hot--un*bearably* hot--so Mrs. McLachlan asks that we meet in her home. Except that her home isn't much cooler, really, and we end up running through only one or two short pieces--the Bach *Prelude*, usually, one of my Chopin *Mazurkas*--before Mrs. McLachlan declares that it's iced tea time. Then, for the duration of the lesson, we chat about various things. My Extended Essay, my holiday plans, life in the senior hostel.

Today, Mrs. McLachlan skips my lesson entirely, leading me, instead, straight to the sitting room where the iced tea is ready to serve in a pitcher beside two frosted glasses filled with ice cubes and lemon wedges. She has something to ask me--a favor, of sorts--that has to do with my Extended Essay, actually. All those little folk songs I've been talking about. Would I be willing to perform one of them--possibly two, should it come to an encore--at a special function in Mbabane early in December? It's a prestigious gathering hosted by the local Rotary Club.

Mrs. McLachlan gives me all of the details as she pours our iced tea. She explains that three years ago, the Mbabane Rotarians donated to the college's Music Department a generous sum of money. The money, in fact, made possible the construction of the new practice rooms, as well as the purchase of four new pianos, a complete stereo system, and a small library of classical recordings. In return, the college's Music Department--headed by Mrs. McLachlan--sends an elite group of Waterford students to perform at the Rotary Club's annual Christmas luncheon. The gesture is meant, in part, to show our appreciation for the Rotarians' cash donation and also to demonstrate that their money has directly benefited students from around the world.

Unfortunately, Colleen, says Mrs. McLachlan, pausing to sip her tea, the Rotarians would not be pleased to learn that their gift to the college has benefited one--a mere *one*--senior student. And a Canadian at that. Not that there is anything wrong with being Canadian, you understand. But--to be perfectly frank--these gentleman would like to believe that their donation is bringing music to the underprivileged, if you will.

I watch the ice cubes melt in my glass, waiting for Mrs. McLachlan to finish.

Ideally, she continues, we would like to bring a large group of African music students to them. *Black* Africans representing countries from the poorest countries on the continent. And we are doing our best to recruit pupils from the lower forms who "fit the bill," so to speak.

She pauses again as she pours more iced tea into our glasses.

Of course, says Mrs. McLachlan, regardless of how many black Africans we find, we still need you there. We need you because you are our only senior student.

Mrs. McLachlan sips from her glass.

With your tan, she says, and with your dark hair, you could conceivably pass for an Indian. A Red Indian, that is. An *American* Indian. I have considered this as a perfectly viable option. Except that I haven't a clue what you would then perform at the luncheon.

I shift in my seat.

No, she says, I could never ask you to pose as an American Indian. Given the topic of your Extended Essay, however, I could ask--I am asking--that you represent *Ukraine* at the luncheon.

But I'm not--

I know you're not, says Mrs. McLachlan, frowning. That isn't the point. The point is that you can pass for one and not a single Rotarian soul will know the difference. Eastern Europe is widely recognized as a--as a less-than-developed part of the world, Colleen, and it goes without saying that we haven't any other Eastern European music students, in the lower forms or in the IB class.

Mrs. McLachlan taps the side of her glass with her fingernail.

There is, of course, she says, the small matter of national dress. Which we shall have to quickly "iron out," so to speak. All of the lower form African students will be performing in their respective national costumes. Genuine Ukrainian attire would be best, I realize. Mind you, with the time constraints we're dealing with, it would be naive, really, to imagine that we could locate--

I'll call my mom, I say, interrupting Mrs. McLachlan. If I ask, she'll send my full *Poltovsky* costume. First thing tomorrow morning.

A possibility, says Mrs. McLachlan. And certainly, by all means, you should try. Do we rely, however, on the Swazi postal services to deliver in time for the luncheon? No. We prepare a back-up. In fact, Colleen, the back-up has already been prepared. I've taken it upon myself to organize a costume for you--not genuine Ukrainian, mind you, but genuine *Slavic*. Polish, actually. Katja Malanowski has been kind enough to lend us her national dress.

I nearly spit out my iced tea.

Does Katja know what it will be used for? I ask. Because if she knew, she would never have lent it. The cultural differences between Poles and Ukrainians are too great. She knows that. She knows that the Polish costume would never--

Katja *knows*, says Mrs. McLachlan, interrupting me, that I need her help. Which is all that she *needs* know. Come now, Colleen, you are an intelligent person. Use that intelligence to set aside whatever cultural differences you may perceive. We are talking, after all, about a donation to the college of a half-million rand, every cent of which you *have* enjoyed, *are* enjoying, and will *continue* to enjoy as long as you remain a student at Waterford. If members of the Rotary Club are favourably impressed by us at the luncheon, they could potentially double--even triple--that number in future donations to the Music Department.

Mrs. McLachlan sets down her glass.

Under the circumstances, she says, I think that the Polish costume will do just fine.

You are assuming, I say, that I'll agree to wear it.

I'm not *assuming*, Colleen, says Mrs. McLachlan. Trusting is the word. I'm *trusting* that you will wear it.

After I leave Mrs. McLachlan's house, I march straight to the pay phone in the common room of the senior hostel. With the difference in time zones, my call is going to wake Mom and Dad, I know. When they hear the ringing of the phone at two o'clock in the morning they're going to think that something has happened, that someone is in trouble--Sophie, Wes, me. There has been an emergency, a car accident, a rape, an aneurysm. A death.

Dad answers the phone, accepts the collect call. I say that I need help. He says, Tell me what to do. You need money? In the background, I hear Mom getting out of bed, asking, What's going on? Is it about Colleen? Is she all right? The costume, they promise--relieved that all I need is a costume--will be on its way by eight o'clock the next day. Blouse, boots, headpiece. Slip, skirt, apron, socks. Beads, velvet vest. Everything.

And then, I wait. Two packages from home are on their way now--one carrying *pysanky*-making supplies and Ukrainian music, one carrying my costume--though the costume has highest priority. I tell myself that if the costume doesn't arrive in time for the luncheon, I won't go. Simple as that. I'll feign sickness--the stomach flu, maybe, or sun stroke, even better. The closer the date of the luncheon and the longer I wait, the more I hope for no rain. Without rain, sun stroke is good and believable.

Two days before the Rotary Club show, my Ukrainian costume is still in transit, and I'm getting nervous. We've had three rehearsals for the performance and none of the lower form acts are much good. The Form Three choir has a sort of song-and-dance routine worked out for *Puttin' On the Ritz*, and their singing isn't bad but their movements are clumsy, out-of-synch with the music. One Form One Nigerian soloist keeps forgetting the second verse to her rendition of a Mariah Carey ballad. There is a Somali flautist from Form Five whose act seems promising--she's playing a piece from *The Nutcracker Suite*--provided she doesn't faint from stage fright.

My songs-- *Chaban* and *Chervona rozha*--are the strongest of the group, obviously. The other students put no energy into their performances, have no stage presence. Their songs don't engage the audience. When I sing, Mrs. McLachlan's head bobs in time with the music. She taps her foot, too, and claps her hands periodically during the refrains.

I try suggesting to Mrs. McLachlan that the African students perform different material. I tell her that they would do a far better job of African music. Mrs. McLachlan shakes her head. She says that the Rotarians want to see that the Waterford music students have been civilized, so to speak, by the music program; the Rotarians want to hear Western music. I remind her that I'm performing non-Western music. Mrs. McLachlan glares. She says that I'm an exception. The African students look African. But if I don't sing in Ukrainian, how ever would the Rotarians know that I'm Ukrainian?

I think that I have to go. I have no choice. Do I? I'm the show's only hope. I have to perform--with or without the Ukrainian costume. I think. I'm not convinced. The day before the Rotary luncheon, I try to imagine that it is the day of the concert. Katja is watching me as I dress in her costume. I see her pointing at me, throwing back her head, cackling like the Wicked Witch of Poland. You don't know who you are, do you? she says. Canadian? Ukrainian? No! It's best to be Polish, isn't it? *Isn't it* Colleen?

What I need is advice--*Rosa's* advice, her help. Her support. There is only one day to go before the luncheon. Twenty-four hours. My Ukrainian costume is never going to arrive in time. Do I give in and wear the Polish costume? It's just clothing, really. Just fabric. Right? And I *have* benefited from the Rotary Club's money. And the concert is going to stink without me. And Mrs. McLachlan is going to kill me if I don't wear it.

While I talk, Rosa lies on her back in the sick bay bed. This is her sixth visit. The Waterford senior boys' soccer team just defeated Woodmead High School from Johannesburg, so she has Marco freshly on her mind.

I ask if I should wear the Polish costume. Rosa says, No. Yes. Maybe. I tell her that I'll feel guilty disappointing Mrs. McLachlan. Rosa says, So wear the costume. I tell her that I'd feel like her puppet if I put the thing on. And after all that's happened between Katja and me? Rosa says, Don't wear it. I tell her that maybe I should rise above Katja. Rosa says, Rise above.

Then Rosa turns her face to the window of the sick bay. She's thinking about the Christmas holiday, I know it. She's been mulling over our trip for a while now, and she's finally starting to *dread* it--starting to dread six full weeks without Marco. Rosa wants to change our plans to include him.

So I shouldn't wear the costume? I say.

Rosa turns back to face me. Are there tears in her eyes?

Rosa says, Sorry, what costume are you talking about exactly?

I walk away from sick bay with a sick feeling in my stomach. Rosa didn't really hear a word I said. Couldn't set Marco aside for five minutes to help me, to think about me.

By the morning of the luncheon, the package from home--the package with my costume in it--still hasn't arrived. Packages arrive at the college once a day, in the evenings. My costume hasn't made it in time.

Mrs. McLachlan knocks on the door of my room--to help me, she says, with Katja's costume. To make sure that I wear the outfit, is more like it. When she enters my cubie, I'm lying in bed with my blankets pulled up to my chin. I tell her that I'm coming down with something, a flu bug probably; that I've got the chills. I'm dizzy. All my joints are aching, my head hurts, my throat is sore. I tell her that I should probably go to sick bay for the rest of the day.

Sick bay, says Mrs. McLachlan, is occupied *again* by Ms. Rosalind Russell.

In one, fluid motion, Mrs. McLachlan drops a garment bag on my bed and yanks the blankets off my bed.

I ask if I could do the performance in regular clothes--a nice skirt, a nice blouse, maybe? High heels? Or I could wear half of the costume--the Polish blouse only, with a pair of black slacks.

Out of the question. Mrs. McLachlan unzips the garment bag, handing me pieces of Katja's costume. Katja, thank God, is in History class. Otherwise, she would see that I look ridiculous in her clothes, that none of them fit me very well. The blouse and vest are too snug in the boobs, I swim in the waistband of the skirt, my feet are pinched in at the toes by her boots. Mrs. McLachlan pins the waistband tight, pulls the blouse over my head and my shoulders. She helps wedge my feet into the boots; arranges the lace around my collar; adjusts the headpiece. When she's finished dressing me, Mrs. McLachlan says that the costume is flattering to my figure. I look positively stunning.

But as Mrs. McLachlan and I make our way through the girls' hostel, on the way to the car park, we pass by a full-length mirror. I see for myself. I see the frilly, round clown's collar around my neck, and the bulky wreath of cheap, waxy plastic flowers on my head; the fabric of the skirt, pleated and plastered with enormous roses and giant leaves; the billowy sleeves of the blouse embroidered with garish red and yellow and blue flowers. I don't look stunning. Katja's costume isn't the least bit flattering to my figure. All in all, I look short and fat and Polish.

Mrs. McLachlan waits until I am safely seated in the college bus before she informs me--informs all of us on the bus--that she won't be coming along to the Rotary luncheon. As she makes her way down the stairs of the bus, she says, Urgent hostel business. Mrs. Dlamini will be with you every step of the way. And, remember: break a leg!

I nearly do break my leg, chasing after Mrs. McLachlan, tripping on the last stair of the bus as I race to reach her in the car park. I tell her that I'm not going without her, I'm not going alone. Going alone wasn't part of the deal. What if someone recognizes that I'm not wearing a real Ukrainian costume? That I'm not a real Ukrainian?

In a half-whisper, half-hiss, Mrs. McLachlan orders me to get back on the bus. She says that we have to keep in mind the well-being of Waterford's music students. We have to sacrifice--do what's best for the Waterford Music Department as a whole. For the last three years, the Rotary Club has seen Mrs. McLachlan directing the Waterford performance. This year, the Rotarians will be impressed to see that the show is being coordinated by a black African music teacher, a *Swazi* teacher.

I'm not going, I say, setting down my guitar, crossing my arms over my chest.

Consider it a personal favour to me, says Mrs. McLachlan, the corner of her mouth twitching, her voice hardly audible. I need not remind you, Colleen, that I am a powerful woman. Let me assure you that there are steps I can--and most certainly *will*--take if you don't get on that bus instantly. Do we understand one another?

So I am condemned to go through with the charade. Go through with it or be sent home. Mrs. McLachlan's threat is unmistakable. On the drive to Mbabane, through the pre-luncheon cocktails, through the meal, her words echo in my ears. I talk to no one--not the other students, not Mrs. Dlamini, not the Rotarians. In the banquet room filled with two hundred bodies, I am alone.

The lunch itself is a blur. A blur of Mrs. McLachlan's threat, Rosa's indifference, and a half-dozen forks and knives--real silver forks and knives; fine, bone china plates; crystal glasses of varying shapes and sizes. I'm seated between two Form Five Zambian cellists who don't seem remotely underprivileged, who know exactly what to do with each course of the meal and each utensil. They raise their eyebrows, I think, when I use the same fork and knife for the salad and the main course, when I ask for coffee instead of tea, when I use the same teaspoon to stir my coffee and to eat my dessert. To keep my spirits up, I try to focus on the holiday. Rosa will come around. Once we hit the road--once we hit the beaches and the bars--she'll forget that Marco even exists.

When the meal is over, several Rotarians make after-dinner speeches. There is the fat-faced President who can't pronounce his r's; the Treasurer, drunk, clearly, because his ascot is askew and he tells a half-dozen vulgar jokes at the podium. One ancient Rotarian at the front of the room snores loudly throughout the speeches. Another blows cigar smoke straight into my eyes.

The order of the Waterford program is organized according to age, youngest to oldest. I'm the last to perform. Mrs. Dlamini gets up to introduce me, mispronouncing my name--*Colleen Loose-Sack*--and placing the wrong emphasis on *Chaban*. It should be *ChaBAN*. Mrs. Dlamini says *CHAban*. She says *Ukrainian* properly, at least, and *Ukraine*. But if there is an encore, I'll have to introduce *Chervona rozha* myself.

I am midway through the first refrain of *Chaban* when I first spot the Rotarian near the back of the banquet room. He is hard to miss, actually, as he is the only black person in the room--besides the Waterford students, I mean, and Mrs. Dlamini, and the meal servers. In fact, he is the only black *Rotarian* at the luncheon, and he gets up from his chair while I sing to move closer to the podium. Most of the other Rotary Club members seem to be enjoying my performance--some are smiling, others are nodding their approval. The black Rotarian is the only man in the crowd who looks puzzled, who appears to require a closer look.

By the last refrain of the song, I've got him figured out. It isn't hard, really. Once he settles on a spot against the wall at the front of the room, I can see his face, watch his eyes. His expression isn't one of amazement or awe--he doesn't look remotely impressed by the power of my voice or the intricacy of my guitar accompaniment. Instead, the black

Rotarian has a sort of smug look on his face, a look that has *I-know-you're-an-impostor* written all over it. Maybe his work brings him in contact with Polish people or he's married to a Polish woman. Or he's an expert in Slavic languages. Or he's visited Eastern Europe.

Regardless, he knows. And I know that he knows. And, the longer he stares at me, the clearer it becomes that he knows that I know that he knows. Oh *God*. Is there, I wonder, a law against what I'm doing? He could be a lawyer, a Swazi judge. I'll be deported for impersonation. For *fraud*. There will be no encore this afternoon, no *Chervona rozha*.

After I've finished my song, I can't put away my guitar fast enough, can't get out of the banquet room soon enough. There is no time to enjoy the applause or listen for an encore. While the rest of the Waterford students take their time disassembling their instruments, as they chat with members of the Rotary Club, I'm at the curb outside the building, waiting for the college bus to arrive. The temperature must be forty degrees at least. Several minutes on the street and my entire body is wet with perspiration.

He follows me, of course, the black Rotarian. When I feel his tap on my shoulder, I'm not surprised. Edouard Shabalala, Agricultural Engineer. Edouard with an o-u-a, he says. At least he's not a judge. The bus pulls up as Mr. Shabalala is explaining his confusion over me and my performance.

Interesting Ukrainian, he says, in the song. Recognizable, but many mistakes in pronunciation. I *speak* Ukrainian, you see. Ukrainian and Russian. I studied in Ukraine, you know, six years. In Kiev. Ukrainian, Russian--I speak both. The Ukrainians love me.

Everywhere I go in Ukraine they say, *A Black Ukrainian? Doesn't matter! You learn to speak our language, you touch our hearts!*

One by one, the other Waterford students board the bus.

Now, *Loose-Sack*, says Mr. Shabalala. This isn't a Ukrainian name.

Lutzak, I say, my eyes on the door of the bus. My name is Colleen *Lut-zak*.

And now listen to you! he says. American, yes? Not Ukrainian at all.

Canadian, I say, moving toward the bus.

In a Polish suit! says Mr. Shabalala, following me. What a day this has been. My head is spinning!

Mine too, I think, from the heat and the pinch of the costume and the strain of talking to Mr. Shabalala. I walk quickly toward the bus.

You are a fine singer, Colleen Lutzak! says Mr. Shabalala, calling after me as I make my way up the stairs of the bus. A *terrible* Ukrainian, he laughs, but a fine singer!

My face burns as the bus snakes its away out of Mbabane, along Oshoek Road, then up the Waterford hill to the college. By the time the bus arrives at the college, it's five o'clock, nearly dinner time. The senior hostel is empty, the entire IB class is in the assembly hall for our weekly Theory of Knowledge lesson with Mr. Harrington. I am supposed to join the group once I return from the luncheon. I won't, now, of course.

I'll take off the clothes, first--*rip* them off, tearing seams if I have to. Anything to get the costume away from me. Then, with Katja's national dress in a plastic bag--all of the garments rolled into one, wrinkled ball of sweaty cloth--I'll pay a visit to Mrs.

McLachlan. Maybe I'll spit at her feet, right on the costume itself after I dump it out of the bag and onto the floor of her house.

Standing outside my cubie, fumbling with the lock to my door, I spot her out of the corner of my eye--Katja, who should be in the assembly hall with the rest of our class but who is, instead, walking up the corridor towards me. My first impulse is to run. Run *where*, though? To my left are Katja and the only entrance to the girls' hostel; to my right are several girls' cubies and a dead end. As she approaches, I start to walk away from her, in the direction of the dead end. I'll be trapped but I have to try something.

When Katja calls my name, I'm forced to stop, forced to wait for her to do with me what she likes. There will be no yelling, I'm sure--yelling isn't Katja's style. She will interrogate me quietly but firmly--*What are you doing in my clothing?*--followed by a stiff reprimand, a scathing lecture on Ukrainian oppression of Poles, then some sarcastic praise for the way I look in Polish national dress. Here we go, I say to myself, my back to Katja, my eyes closed.

I had no choice! I say, panicking as Katja reaches me. Mrs. McLachlan gave me no choice. I didn't want to--

Forget that, now, says Katja. Put it out of your mind. McLachlan told me everything, I knew beforehand. It doesn't matter.

But I didn't want to--

Quiet! says Katja, pulling me by the arm down the hostel corridor. Listen to me while we walk. It *doesn't matter*, Colleen. We have no time to talk this nonsense. She's gone. She's been gone for hours, since you left earlier this afternoon. Her cubie is empty.

Nobody knows yet. I wouldn't have known myself except that I had to come back for a history book I'd left in my cubie.

Katja leads me through the hostel corridor.

Who's gone? I ask. Gone where?

Rosa, says Katja, as we pass through the hostel doors. She's been sent home, I think. After you left campus, while the rest of us were in class, Mrs. McLachlan escorted her to the car park. I saw it with my own eyes. Rosa had all of her belongings in her arms, she was crying. There was a taxi waiting for her.

I feel my stomach turn as we follow the dirt path that leads to Mrs. McLachlan's front door. Mrs. McLachlan knew. She must have arranged it all--that was her urgent hostel business. I feel dizzy.

We'll talk to her together, says Katja, find out what's happened. Don't worry. I'm staying right here with you. Maybe we can reason with her. Maybe it's not too late.

As Katja's knocks on Mrs. McLachlan's door I'm thinking about drugs. Marco smoked *dagga* all the time. Was Rosa smoking it with him? The *General Information Brochure* is clear about the penalty for being caught with drugs. Or alcohol. Rosa had a half-empty, twenty-six ounce bottle--*our* twenty-six ounce bottle--of *Southern Comfort* in her cubie. If a teacher found the bottle, it could easily result in expulsion, no questions asked. The Brochure is crystal clear about *no questions asked*.

Then, as Mrs. McLachlan opens her front door, I'm thinking about Katja. Why is Katja helping me?

There has been an injustice, says Katja, pulling me by the arm into Mrs. McLachlan's foyer. Mrs. McLachlan's tries to invite us into her sitting room, where we'll all be more comfortable. Katja refuses to budge.

Rosalind Russell is gone, Katja continues, and we have the right to know why. All of us. Every one of us in the senior hostel has a right to know why. Colleen, especially. She is Rosa's closest friend here.

Tears come to my eyes when I hear the words *Rosalind* and *she's gone*. In the same sentence.

You are out of line, young lady, says Mrs. McLachlan to Katja. What went on with Rosalind is between Rosalind Russell, Rosalind Russell's parents, and the administrators of this college.

Was it alcohol? says Katja. Was that it? Because all of the senior students drink. If you expel Rosa for drinking alcohol, you might as well expel the entire hostel, every last one of us.

Don't you *dare* presume to tell me, says Mrs. McLachlan, pointing her finger at Katja, that you or anyone else in the senior hostel has no idea why Rosalind Russell was asked to leave.

Drugs? says Katja.

Ask Rosa's closest friend, says Mrs. McLachlan, turning to face me. Ask Colleen. Go ahead, Colleen. Katja claims to be "in the dark," so to speak. Explain to her why Rosa was suddenly asked to leave.

With Katja's eyes and Mrs. McLachlan's eyes on me--with the moment of silence in the foyer--I feel my heart beat quicken. I don't know why she was asked to leave. I look down at my feet. I'm in the dark, too.

Suffice to say, says Mrs. McLachlan, that as a result of particular steps taken on *my* part--steps I was in no way obliged to take--Rosa *will* return to Waterford in January, after the holiday. At the start of the next term.

I feel myself smiling. Rosa hasn't been expelled at all. She'll be back.

So she *will* be back? I ask. For *sure*?

Under normal circumstances, says Mrs. McLachlan, dropping her voice, Rosa would never again be permitted to set foot on campus. However--and I urge you to keep this to yourselves, girls--I have withheld the details of the matter from the headmaster, opting instead to contact Rosa's parents, both of whom are doctors, as you know. Having made them fully aware of the situation, I was able to extract from them the assurance that her "condition," so to speak, would be taken care of as efficiently and as quietly as possible. She *will* be back, yes, provided all goes well.

At the mention of her "condition," I start to lose my balance. Katja reaches to my side, grabbing hold of my hand.

Consider it, says Mrs. McLachlan, a personal favour to *you*, Colleen. In return for the performance you gave today at the Rotary Club luncheon. Another girl in Rosa's position would be treated--less generously. So to speak.

And the father? Katja asks, tightening her grip on my hand. What happens to Marco? Is he punished as well?

Unfortunately, says Mrs. McLachlan, we have no way of knowing that Marco is the father. Rosa wouldn't come forward with a name.

From Mrs. McLachlan's house to the senior hostel, Katja walks beside me, offering to sit with me a while, saying that she has vodka and that Mrs. McLachlan would think twice, today, about busting us for drinking. Katja says, too, that Rosa is a lucky girl, to have been granted such a break. We should celebrate the second chance Rosa's been given. But I decline Katja's company. Katja doesn't know Rosa like I do. *Taken care of.* Maybe for another girl in Rosa's position, we could celebrate. For someone else--anyone else--it might be a break, a second chance. Not for Rosa. Rosa will never be back.

Slipped under the door of my cubie is a memo from the college secretary, a note stating that there are packages for me to sign for in the General Office. And a drawing. There is a drawing, too--small and untitled, with a signature at the bottom in Rosa's handwriting.

It is a sketch of a girl-embryo facing forward, her face blank. Down along the front of her body, her arms are extended, the fingers of both hands touching to form a heart-shape over her midsection. The embryo is encased in a rose-shaped womb; the umbilical cord, thick with barbs and thorns, winds twice around the embryo's neck. If I look closely at the centre of the picture, I can see a second embryo--a tiny, baby embryo--in the belly of the first.

With the tips of my fingers on the sketch, I run my hand along the surface of the paper--to touch Rosa, I think. To feel her on the page.

But the charcoal smudges easily, and my tears drop onto the drawing, smearing Rosa's signature into the petals of the womb, and I have to put away the picture altogether before I ruin it completely.

***

Why did Rosa never tell me?

She tried to tell you. You just weren't listening.

She never tried to tell me.

Yes she did.

No she didn't.

Did.

Did not.

Did so.

Did not.

Did so.

I'm sitting on the sidewalk next to an occupied phone booth in Little Portugal, waiting for the phone booth to become unoccupied. While I wait, I flip through *The Phoenix* absentmindedly, talking to myself.

No, not talking to myself. With the blankets wrapped tight around my right hand and with my right hand opening and closing, I've made a puppet. So I'm talking to the puppet, really.

But when the puppet starts to disagree with me, I let the blankets go loose around my hand. It's too cold to talk, anyway. And passers-by might think that I've lost my mind. While I keep waiting for the phone, then, I rearrange my blankets. The bedsheet I twist into a long scarf that I wind around my neck several times; the afghan I wrap around my waist, like a skirt; the quilt I throw over my shoulders, like a shawl. It occurs to me that I should move around if I really want to stay warm--I should jump up and down, wiggle my backside, flail my arms about. Except that such movements would mean the end of my afghan-skirt and my quilt-shawl.

So I walk. Onward to the next telephone booth. Onward *ho*, I say aloud, trying to keep my spirits up. Trying to pretend that it doesn't bother me having to look for a pay phone like this because my personal line has been disconnected. Because I couldn't afford to pay the bill. Because I don't have a job. Because I don't have a cent to my name. It doesn't help that imaginary *Phoenix* biographies keep popping into my head uninvited.

Colleen Lutzak, presently searching for a phone booth, certain to find one shortly.

Colleen Lutzak, presently talking to herself in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Colleen Lutzak, more or less destitute but soon to be saved by her Mommy and Daddy.

The first unoccupied pay phone that I come upon is temporarily Out of Service; the next, just outside A.'s House of Music, is in service but Mom and Dad aren't in to take my call. Probably they're at a Christmas party. I consider waiting outside this--the third--phone booth. I do wait. Five minutes, ten minutes. Waiting makes me cold. Again. Just one more, I think, moving onward to the next block. Onward *ho* to the next phone. What's one more block? Again, no answer at home. So I walk to the next phone and the next phone, and one more phone, and one more block, and, after that, another, and another. And before I know it, I've walked very far from my apartment, and I've stopped calling home.

Colleen Lutzak, reaching the end of the line, folks.

People are staring, I know. I know what I must look like to them, wrapped in blankets, carrying *The Phoenix* and an Easter egg. Actually, I hide *The Phoenix* and the *pysanka* under the blankets. It's just the blankets that they see. But the blankets are enough. I notice the odd car slowing down as it passes me, I see people shake their heads at me through restaurant windows. As I walk by one coffee shop, an older woman approaches me, asking if I need a bit of spare change for bus fare home, for a cup of coffee. She offers me the steaming Styrofoam cup in her hand.

Without meeting the woman's eyes, I shake my head, *No*, and I try to keep walking. She follows me, asking me to please take it. She says that it's hot chocolate. Do I like hot chocolate? I'm ashamed to say, Yes-- ashamed to feel the heat of the cup on my hands and the warmth of the liquid in my throat. Ashamed not so much because I want or possibly even need what she is giving but because I've never given like her, never given like this--for no reason, without being asked to give. In St. Paul, in Swaziland. Here, in Toronto. Needy people embarrass me. I've turned away my whole life from homeless people on the street, from crazy people and panhandlers and beggars who asked or didn't ask.

The woman leaves it, finally--leaves the cup of hot chocolate on the top of a *Toronto Star* dispenser--and I stare at it. Long after she's walked away, I'm still staring at it, steam rising from its cover. I set down my *pysanka*, then, and *The Phoenix*. With my arms free, I wrap the quilt tight around my right hand.

The puppet says, *Drink it.*

I say, *I don't want to.*

The puppet says, *Yes you do.*

I say, *No I don't.*

Do so.

Do not.

Do so.

To hell with it. I snatch up the hot chocolate and gulp it down, burning my tongue in the process.

Colleen Lutzak, now accepting handouts.

After I've picked up my belongings again, I turn onto a side street, making my way through a more residential area of the city--no restaurants, no cafés, no shops. Less traffic and therefore fewer eyes on me. I walk on the road itself for several blocks, then on the sidewalk, then back on the road.

For several hours I walk, the tip of my nose going numb as I wind my way past the lit windows of houses and apartments buildings. Sometimes I find myself close enough to people's homes that I can hear the sound of voices--not close enough, though, to make out what the voices are saying. From time to time I hear laughter. Once, from within the walls of an old brick Victorian house, I hear music. Christmas carols, I think, being played on a stereo. I walk for so long that I forget why I'm still walking, why I ever started walking in the first place.

I study things in the residential area. The number of cars parked per block, the number of houses built per block, the number of houses with parked cars in driveways per block. As though I have a purpose here, classifying the neighborhood into categories and quantities; as though there is hidden meaning in the counting. The number of houses with Christmas lights, thirty-seven. The number of cars with broken tail lights, two. The number of pickup trucks, zero. The number of minivans, too many to keep track.

And the number of homeless people skulking around the normal people's normal neighborhood? says the puppet.

One. Or half of one, point five. I'm not a real homeless person. I have an apartment, I've just wandered away from it. I'm too tired to go back, though, so I'm partly homeless. The problem is, even partly homeless people don't belong in this neighborhood.

I make my way back to a busier street, then, where homeless people are normal. Though I don't see anyone else lying down on the sidewalk. No street kids, no prostitutes, no bag ladies. Just me, between a bus shelter and a red *Canada Post* mailbox. I don't plan to sleep, actually. All I need a little rest. Except that cars are passing by, now, and the odd bus, and, without thinking, I count them, too. It's as though I'm small again, counting sheep before bed.

When I wake up, there is a bright light above me. I know what it is, I've heard about such lights before. As I rub the sleep from my eyes, I wait for the light to get brighter and brighter, warmer and warmer; for the light to beckon me, draw me up into its beam. There will be choirs, I think. Music so perfect and pure that I won't be able to--won't even want to--resist.

It's a guitar that I hear. A guitar? Slightly out of tune, and cheap. Plastic strings, I'm sure. *Jesus*. I can't even die properly.

He's busking several feet from me--a regular guy leaning against the front window of a butcher shop with a cheap guitar in his hands, a harmonica beside him, an open guitar case in front of him.

For a moment, I sit up, watching the guy play and sing, thinking that maybe he is a sign--a sign from God telling me where to go now, and what to do. Signs happen to other people all the time. Why not me? I wait for his head to start glowing, for a halo to appear over his knitted toque. His toque, I notice, is yellow; his voice is nasal and high-pitched. Angels *are* androgynous. They come in all shapes and sizes.

I listen carefully to the words of the busker's songs for a message. He sings an Elvis medley, some Bob Dylan tunes. Three Beatles songs--"Hard Day's Night"; the one that starts with the words, *She was just seventeen*; "Hey Jude." Yes, I think, hope flickering before me for an instant. It has been a hard day's night. But I'm nineteen, and my name is Colleen, not Jude. When the busker starts in on Simon and Garfunkel's "Feelin' Groovy," I get up to leave. Forget it. There are no signs here, no messages. I don't feel the least bit *groovy*. I feel stiff and hungry and cold.

The busker lifts his eyes as I pass him--lifts his eyes and his eye*brows*, I notice. As though he is expecting something from me. Money, I suppose. I have been listening to him for some time--a half hour, at least--I owe him a dollar or two. At least. Those are the rules--you listen, you pay. He doesn't look very well off, his parka is worn, his toque is dingy; he can't be doing this for fun. Of course, my pockets are empty. I haven't got a cent on me, let alone a dollar. Walking away, I tell myself that probably his guitar case is full of coins. Probably he doesn't need anything from me.

When the music stops, I stop. When I turn around to face the busker, he is rubbing his hands together and blowing on them. His fingers are white with cold. His breath is turning to fog in the cold night air. There is no one else on the street, just us, and he is as cold as me, and I can see, now, that his guitar case is as empty as my pockets. The only difference between us is that he's singing his heart out, and I'm not.

It isn't worth much, I know. Actually, it isn't worth anything, but it's the only thing in the world I have to give. I tell myself this as I rip a page from *The Phoenix* and crumple it and shape it to form a little cradle; as I place the *pysanka* within the folds of the paper; as I set the makeshift paper cradle and the *pysanka* inside his guitar case.

You can't eat it! I call back to the busker as I make my way down the street, in the direction of home.

The sun is rising as I round the corner of my block, as the idea comes to me. The sun is rising. Which makes today Christmas Eve. Are stores open on Christmas Eve? I wonder, walking up the stairs to my apartment. The convenience store on the corner never closes. I could stand in front of it with my guitar strapped around my neck and shoulders. I could borrow scissors from the cashier to cut the tips off the fingers of my gloves. Busking isn't begging. The guy playing and singing on the street--he was doing legitimate work. Of course, I would choose Christmas carols for my material. Portuguese carols would be best. Spanish carols might even do. Too bad I don't know any Portuguese or Spanish Christmas music.

There are always the standard English favourites, I think, grabbing my guitar from my apartment. *Jingle Bells, Winter Wonderland, White Christmas.* They seem silly, though, somehow, and overdone, too. Department stores have been playing *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* and *Here Comes Santa Claus* since the middle of November. As for the darker, more solemn Christmas songs--*Silent Night, What Child Is This.* They're *too* solemn. Who wants to hear depressing music at Christmas?

My puppet hand starts to move again, all on its own. It says, *Face it, Colleen. You have nothing to sing.*

But I could sing carols that no one in this neighborhood has heard before. I could sing in a language foreign to the people in Little Portugal. They would stop to listen, surely, out of curiosity. They would drop money into my guitar case--or not. Possibly not. Surely some would talk to me, though. Some would ask questions, start real conversations about the songs. What are you singing? What do the words mean?

The puppet says, *You're asking for trouble. You don't have a clue what they mean.*

I say, *I know what the titles mean.*

Oh no you don't.

Oh yes I do.

Do not.

Do so.

Do not.

I raise my voice then, right there in my apartment. *Do so, do so, do so, do so*! I *do so* know what the titles mean! And that's enough. That's a *start*.

While I bundle up in T-shirts and sweaters, in long underwear and blue jeans, I yell out song titles and word meanings at the top of my lungs, like a television evangelist. *Boh narodyvsia*, God Is Born! *Boh predvichnyi*, God Eternal! *U Vyfleiemi*. In Bethelehem! My voice breaks as I start to cry and laugh at the same time. *Nova radist stala*. A New Joy Has Emerged. A New *Joy*, god*dammit*. *Dyvnaia novyna*. A New *Miracle*.

Through my tears and laughter, and through a stack of books in the corner of the apartment, I search frantically for my songbook. The songbook that I bought in *Carpathia Arts*. I scatter newspapers and magazines; send paperbacks flying across the apartment. The book is here, I know it. I just had it the other day, I just saw it. My little yellow songbook with all the words to a hundred Ukrainian songs.

Zaspivaimo Sobi. Let's Sing Out In Ukrainian.

When I finally find the book, I clutch it to my chest; I feel it rise and fall as I take a deep, calming breath; I touch it to one cheek, then the other, giggling as I wet its cover with my tears. And as I head outside to the sidewalk in front of the corner store, more imaginary, one-line *Phoenix* biographies come to me, one by one by one.

Colleen Lutzak, presently calls Toronto home.

Colleen Lutzak, pursuing a career in music.

Colleen Lutzak, singing for a living. Singing! Like she always said she would.

Epilogue

The idea is mine: I choose to go. I want to see where Kalyna is buried. I want to eat on her grave.

Dad says that he can't come along--he'd like to, sure, but there are rocks to be picked, fields to be cultivated and seeded. Sophie says that she would rather pick rocks on her hands and knees--would rather seed all eighty acres of Dad's land by hand, churn up the soil with a rake and a hoe. Anything but listen to the priest drone on for three-and-a-half hours in the church at Szypenitz. With the warm weather, says Sophie, the place will be like an oven, and outside won't be much better. The mosquitoes are hatching in droves.

Wes isn't around to ask, of course. His summer job started two weeks ago--he's living in a tent several miles north of a university research station near Athabasca, studying amphibians. Frogs, to be specific. This is a crucial time for his work. Most of the research data for the project is collected during a brief, ten-day period during which all frog eggs are miraculously transformed into living, gill-breathing, sperm-like swimmers. Wes is going to catch them and drop them into cages submerged in ponds; he's going to add various species of minnows to the cages. And then, for the rest of the summer, he's going to watch the effect of the fish on the tadpoles.

Only Mom agrees to come along with me to church--though reluctantly, at first. My nose ring is the problem. I catch her staring at it across the kitchen table while we eat breakfast, across the kitchen counter while she makes supper. She hasn't actually said anything about the piercing since I came home from Toronto. In fact, aside from the collective gasp the family let out in the airport in Edmonton, no one has mentioned my nose--as though they've made a pact not to criticize or offend me. As though a wrong word might drive me away again. I haven't decided yet if I'm going back.

But Mom is bothered, I know, by the ring in my nose. Because when I offer to take it out for *Provody*, she looks visibly relieved, and her reservations about going to church with me disappear.

Just for *Provody*, I say. Afterwards, the nose ring goes back in.

Mom doesn't argue. Instead, she smiles--as though one day without the nose ring is enough. Is a start.

We've never actually gone to a *Provody* service before, I've only heard about it from the aunts and the uncles. The morning of the day before church, I rise early. I ask Mom if maybe we should bake *babky* and *pasky*, if maybe we should make *pysanky*, roast a ham--to take with us, to be blessed by the priest. Aren't we supposed to bring a basket full of special foods and Easter eggs? I ask. Mom laughs, No. That's for Easter, and Easter has come and gone. For *Provody*, we bring whatever we like for the priest to bless. Mom says that she'll defrost a ring of moose *kovbasa* from the freezer, and a *kolach* or two left over from Christmas. She'll boil some eggs. I should run to St. Paul and pick up some flowers for Kalyna's grave.

Think of it as a picnic, says Mom.

A picnic with the dead, says Sophie, humming the theme music from *The Twilight Zone*.

While I get ready to go to town, Sophie hovers around me, asking what the hell has come over me. Since when are you such a devout Christian? she says. I ignore her, keep combing my hair. It is *the* most morbid tradition, she says. I pull my hair back into a ponytail, brush mascara on my eyelashes. And we've never gone to church before, she says, following me from my bedroom to the kitchen. Hardly ever, says Sophie. I grab the car keys from the kitchen counter. Why start now? she says.

Sophie is wrong, I think, pulling out of the driveway, turning onto the highway that leads to St. Paul. She doesn't understand. Though I'm not sure how to explain it to her--that *Provody* isn't the most morbid tradition, that it isn't morbid at all. Visiting the graves of loved ones, bringing flowers and food--sharing a meal with them. What could be more beautiful? It's as if to say that they've never really left us. Or that they've left us, but they aren't really gone. And it isn't like remembering them. No. It isn't at all like remembering. It's sitting with them, and talking, and lifting a glass to say--*Dai Bozhe*, I suppose.

St. Paul has changed since I left for Swaziland, since I left again for Toronto. The oil patch is booming they say, so business has picked up in town. Zarowny Motors has doubled in size. As I drive down the length of main street, East to West, past the Co-Op Mall and Peavey Mart--past the A&W, the Dairy Queen, the Subway restaurant--dozens of brand new pickups and four-by-fours roar past me. The Dairy Queen is new, Subway is new. There is talk, apparently, of a McDonald's opening in the fall.

Near the centre of town, on the convent lawn beside the Catholic church--between the cathedral and the francophone school, *École du Sommet*--there is a Century 21 sign. The convent is closed-up, For Sale. All of the remaining Sisters of Assumption have been shipped East to convents in Montreal. The Bishop has erected an enormous sign in front of the church--a billboard, really--with a photograph of a young, pregnant girl and a photograph of a fetus and the words, *Love Them Both.* North of town, his new retirement residence--the *Bishop's* retirement residence, I mean--is nearly complete, triple car garage and all.

To the right of the Post Office is the old Donald Hotel with new fiberglass siding and new cedar shingles; new paint on the doors; a new sign above the door of the bar. The Donald is just a bar with a small, attached restaurant and five or maybe six rooms upstairs--I've never actually been inside, it's the roughest bar in town. On the new sign, though, Daisy Duck is lifting a mug of frothy beer to her bill; Donald Duck is passed out at her webbed feet.

Toward the west end of St. Paul, the town becomes almost unrecognizable. The old bingo hall has been given a facelift, its corrugated iron walls painted blue and white. Beside the bingo hall, there is a posh new spa outlet that sells indoor and outdoor jacuzzis and whirlpool bathtubs. A new RCMP detachment--all brick and glass--has been built in the empty lot next to the Rec. Centre. The Lebanese Burger Baron has burnt to the ground. Al's Topline Tackle has become Sunshine Video; the Boston Café, Mr. Wong's Chinese restaurant, has become UFO Pizza.

The UFO Landing Pad hasn't changed--same mushroom-like suspended slab of concrete; same dozen drab, weather-beaten provincial and territorial flags flying from the Landing Pad's back end. The Landing Pad was built in 1967 as our town's Centennial Project. Other towns built curling rinks in 1967; they built hockey arenas, community halls. Vegreville built their giant *pysanka*. We built a Landing Pad, so that if aliens were to visit Earth, their first stop would be St. Paul.

Maybe Town Council has gotten tired of waiting. Because South of the Landing Pad, now, they are building a UFO. In fact, construction of the UFO is nearly complete--it's tall and oblong-shaped with an enormous, glowing green dome and hundreds of flashing yellow lights. Rumor has it that there are several rooms inside, and a sort of cockpit inside the green dome. The UFO is going to double as a TIC. Tourist Information Centre.

And there is a new *Welcome to St. Paul* sign, too, on the west end of town--though it's odd, I think, that we have only one *Welcome* sign on only one end of the town. As though all newcomers arrive from the west, never from the east. On the new sign, a local artist has painted a red voyageur sash intertwined with the ribbons of a woman's red-poppied headpiece, all superimosed on a drawing of a teepee perched on the UFO Landing Pad. Words have been painted below the picture. *Bienvenue, Tawow, BITAEMO.*

After selecting a flower shop--there are three, now, in town to choose from--there is the matter of picking out flowers. The saleslady in *The Jungle* steers me toward carnations, lilies, orchids, daisies. Fresh-cut bouquets, ready-made glass vase arrangements. She tells me that baby's breath costs extra, pussywillows cost extra; ivy, heather, or foxtail--extra, extra, and extra. But Easter lilies are marked down by fifty percent, and she's practically giving away potted Poinsettas.

In fact, I don't need the saleslady's help. I know what I want. Roses.

And then, the next morning, there is the drive to Szypentiz past buildings that probably haven't changed since I was a little girl--since before I was born, really. I see the same country stores at St. Bride's and Brosseau and Duvernay, selling the same hard and soft ice-cream, the same Coca-Cola products. As we pass through Saddle Lake, there is the same worn, weather-beaten siding on houses along both sides of the reservation road--the same mangy dogs and rusted cars with grass growing up through their frames; kids playing on the shoulder of the highway that leads first to Two Hills, then to Edmonton. After Saddle Lake, we make a sharp turn West toward Hairy Hill, go West past the old Szypenitz Hall--same old graffiti, *Grad' 76, Grad' 77*--and onto Szypenitz church, a little ways down the hill.

The buildings are all the same, I know. But the countryside, somehow, looks different to me--as different as St. Paul with its new store fronts, and its new restaurants, and its new UFO. The fields look--greener, somehow. The roads seem wider. It feels as though the sky has been slit open--as though it's bleeding a warm, endless blue. I try to explain to Mom that everything has changed, shifted. *Grown*. Mom tells me not to talk nonsense. You haven't been gone that long, she says.

As Szypenitz church comes into focus on the horizon, Mom presses her foot to the brake. The churchyard is empty.

Oh dear, says Mom, pulling up to the church gates. Where is everyone? Oh *dear*. Mom's face reddens. It's been so long, she says, *so* long since I've been to *Provody*. Ten o'clock. It's always started at ten. Look at your watch, Colleen. What time is it?

Ten to ten.

I've never seen my mother so flustered. She apologizes a half-dozen times, fumbling through a half-dozen explanations of what might have happened. We've got the wrong day. The wrong time? There is a new priest, she's heard. A new priest in the area, since Father Zubritsky retired. Father Zubritsky always held *Provody* services at Szypenitz the Sunday after Easter, ten o'clock. The new priest must do things differently. Maybe he holds *Provody* here two Sundays after Easter, or three. Maybe he's given up *Provody* altogether. But she should have called--one of her sisters, one of the ladies from the church choir. Just to make sure, she should have called.

We wait a half hour for the priest to drive up to the church yar, for other cars to arrive. Why didn't I call? says Mom. What does it take to pick up the phone and call? She shakes her head, tears come to her eyes. I'm kicking myself, she says. I'm kicking myself for not double-checking. You were looking forward to this, I know. I know you were, Colleen. This was important.

That's when I grab Mom's hand, and I squeeze. We don't need a priest, we don't need other people. We can have our own *Provody*.

Mom doesn't look convinced.

Come on, Mom, I say. We didn't come all this way just to turn around and go home again. Let's eat! Just the three of us, you and me and Kalyna.

But there is someone else with us in the cemetery as Mom and I spread out the embroidered cloth over Kalyna's grave--I'm sure of it. As we set out the bread, the meat, and the eggs, as we lay the roses across the gravestone, I feel her presence--as real as if she were sitting with us, preparing to eat with us.

Rosa didn't come back to Waterford, like Mrs. McLachlan said she would, though I believe that Mrs. McLachlan was right about one thing. Rosa didn't have the baby--if she had, she would have written letters to me, and she would have sent photos. If not letters and photos then sketches of her child growing up.

But in the cemetery at Szypenitz, I am not remembering Rosa--neither Rosa nor Kalyna. I am not mourning for them. I am lifting my glass with them, and laughing with them. I am telling them that spring has arrived here, at home, in the most remarkable way--touching everything in its wake. The snow has all receded and melted, the ice is gone from the lakes. The days are long, now, and getting longer. Of course, some of the back roads are dotted with potholes and lined with deep, muddy ruts. But the roads will dry, and the ditches will be green again, soon--green, gold, bright pink, deep red. There will be sweet grass, and brown-eyed Susans, and highbush cranberry, and wild, wild roses.

Rosa, I think, could see this all for herself--if she wanted to--but she is pretending that she doesn't hear me as she quietly peels the shell of the egg before her.

And Kalyna is humming to herself, rocking back and forth with her knees pulled up to her chest. She is cocking her head sideways, squinting to keep the sun out of her eyes, and she hears everything I say about the arrival of spring--but she doesn't care to talk about it. Kalyna wants to know my name, instead, and she wants me to sing for her.

Mom and I talk over lunch about how relieved we are, really, to have missed the long church service--the up down, up down; the incense; the *hospody pomylos* from the choir loft. We say that it's just as well we came early--early by an hour, or a week, or two weeks. It doesn't matter. We decide that we should do this again next year--the same way, skipping the service altogether.

When we've finished lunch, Mom and I wrap up everything in the embroidered cloth--the shards of eggshell, the half-ring of *kovbasa*. The roses we leave on Kalyna's grave and the braided bread, the *kolach*, we leave for the birds. We are quiet in the car on the way home, each of us staring out our side of the windshield, thinking about different things, I suppose. She is thinking about what she'll make for supper, maybe, or her lesson plans for the next school day. I'm thinking about the wording of an ad I might place in next week's *St. Paul Journal*. EXPERIENCED MUSICIAN FOR HIRE. As we approach home, I speak, breaking the silence for the first time since we left Szypenitz.

I'll probably stay, I say, half-whispering as we pause in front of the garage.

Mom doesn't hear me with the sound of the garage doors opening. Turning to me, she says, I'm sorry. Did you say something?

Oh no, I say. Nothing. Nothing at all.